



STEVE
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WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

Let's relearn how to live together

It is a curse to live in an era you do not understand. It is a fair bet many Oregonians, across the political spectrum, harbor that anxiety.

In the recent Oregon election, five Eastern Oregon counties voted in favor of joining Idaho. This is a movement that's been around for a while. Although differing from the concept of the State of Jefferson, conceived in 1941, to form a new state from counties in southern Oregon and Northern California, it flows from the same sense of marginalization.

Oregon is not unique in how its economic and political cultures are frequently divided. Joel Garreau gave the most complete explanation of this reality in his 1981 book, "The Nine Nations of North America." State borders are artificial lines that group together populations with discordant priorities. If we were starting from scratch, all state lines might bear little resemblance to what they are.

As with the State of Jefferson, Idaho annexing elements of Eastern Oregon is unlikely to occur. It would take agreement within the Salem and Boise statehouses, as well as in Congress. Approval of such a reconfiguration would give license to an avalanche of similar efforts around the country, setting a precedent few state and national leaders would welcome.

While I don't think the Idaho plan is good for Oregon, I understand the emotional motivation among Eastern Oregon voters. An author of the separation concept, Mike McCarter, of La Pine, has said: "Rural Oregon is in an abusive relationship with Willamette Valley." McCarter is the former president of the Oregon Agribusiness Council and the Oregon Association of Nurserymen.

Much of what chafes at rural people is Salem's and Portland's ignorance of what lies east of Hood River. That eventually comes down to natural resources management.

Animosity toward Salem revolves around how land uses are prioritized. In the broadest terms, Oregonians who live beyond the state's northwest urban center too often are made to feel like bumpkins for pursuing the economic opportunities at hand, which despite impressive diversification often still revolve around agriculture and wood products.

Conversely, the state's urban zeitgeist is to see other Oregonians as mired in an outmoded attachment to traditional extractive industries — and under the sway of Trumpist grievances.

One does not have to live in the broad, dry expanse of Eastern Oregon to feel the brunt of Salem's ignorance. Here at the mouth of the Columbia River, Salem's myopia was apparent in 2012 with former Gov. John Kitzhaber's needless, scientifically baseless and bone-headed attack on gillnet fishermen. Gov. Kate Brown has lacked the guts to undo Kitzhaber's stupid policy.

Meanwhile, Oregon's largest city has become a place many of us no longer recognize. For me, the transformation began years ago when The Oregonian debased its product. Like it or not, a metropolitan area is a media center. But that is no longer the case with Portland.

The riots and vandalism have given downtown Portland, sheathed in plywood, an ugly and bereft look. The city's weak political leadership has enabled a catastrophe that has gone on about a year, perpetuating a sense of a place not in control of itself, and certainly in no position to lecture or dictate to others.

The divisiveness illustrated by the Greater Idaho idea is part of a larger nostalgia for the decades immediately following World War II, when Oregon viewed itself as overcoming petty differences in the pursuit of sensible accommodations that generated mutual success. Like most nostalgia, this rosy view minimizes the hard negotiations — and occasional hard feelings — that set the stage for a prosperous and egalitarian period of progress.

Rekindling these conditions requires a deliberate and well-executed process. Respectful discussions coupled with concrete follow through are what it will take to bridge Oregon's urban-rural divide.

While each of the 36 counties can't go its own way, or find greener political grass across the Idaho border, Oregonians can and must do a better job of listening to one another.

Steve Forrester, the former editor and publisher of The Astorian, is the president and CEO of EO Media Group.

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Taking the center desk



PHIL
WRIGHT
FROM THE NEWSROOM

I never set out to be a newspaper reporter, but then I built a career in journalism as a reporter for the East Oregonian.

I didn't set out to be an editor. But a couple of years ago I was growing a bit weary of rushing to the next terrible car crash, house fire or worse. Circumstances in life and my career aligned, and the EO Media Group in late 2019 presented me with the opportunity to be the editor of The Observer in La Grande.

I did not just jump at the offer. I had to give it a good think and talk it over with people I trust. One question I got: Did I really want to be working as a reporter for the next 20 years?

I found the answer was no. So I left the EO for the new gig.

That was a turbulent ride of about 18 months for a lot of reasons, and having a bloody pandemic didn't help. While that was hard work, my time at The Observer helped me hone skills outside of just reporting.

My friend and colleague, EO reporter Antonio Sierra, asked me some time ago, I don't recall just when, if I ever gave

thought to being an editor at the EO.

Rather than being the editor of the East Oregonian, I was far more interested in helming the newsroom.

I was fortunate as a reporter to work with some solid editors who oversaw the news content. The best who sat in the newsroom's center desk coached me and other reporters, guiding us to produce deeper coverage and more meaningful

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news. That job appealed to me.

So in May, East Oregonian editor and publisher Andrew Cutler asked me to meet for breakfast. The EO's news editor was leaving, and Andrew wrote a new job description for the post. He asked me to read it over, but with me in mind.

There were a lot of bullet points on that

document, but it boiled down to working with East Oregonian reporters to develop stories and features. I had a couple of weeks to think about coming back to the place I started in reporting, but this time as its news editor.

I sussed out the pros and cons and found taking the center desk had been tugging at me a long time. I also often agree with Andrew on the direction of news, and when we don't, he listens to my differences. So here I am.

This is not the EO as I left it, but then, what places are like they were in 2019? Two years that seem like a decade ago. Our reporters have been working remotely for more than a year. We still meet via video. Our news staff is smaller now and also younger.

Those are challenges, sure, and I'm in a transition to this role, but I already feel more like a teacher or coach, and I dig that.

I dig, too, the enthusiasm I see in this newsroom. This bunch is dedicated and hungry. They want to report local news that matters. My role is to help them do that better, and I relish that.

And taking the center desk here, at the hometown paper where I earned my bones in this field? Yeah, that's about as good a homecoming as a guy can hope for.

Phil Wright is the news editor of the East Oregonian.

What country will this be for my grandson's family?



JANET
WHITNEY
OTHER VIEWS

My grandson and his wife, who have been living and working in Europe for almost three years, are here visiting family. They are young and bright, with backgrounds in economics and health care. Ready to begin a family, the question arises of where to put down roots.

The country they currently live in provides safety and security for its citizens: child care, health care and education. Basic subsistence provides a security that frees people to make healthy life choices. Contrary to being on the dole, people there work as hard as in any country.

Foremost in our family discussions is the challenge to democracy we struggle with today in the United States. The last administration has upended our society. The former president has put our shadow side on the table; we must now deal with our racism, painfully and honestly. As we come to grips with the reality of racism, inequality and the myths we have perpetuated about the American dream, we are asking hard questions.

Our history confirms that injustice harms both the oppressed and the oppressor. We all suffer, in a variety of ways, the consequences of bigotry and hate. Unfortunately, politicians in Congress, paralyzed by fear over loss of power and wealth, make up the majority of a Senate that is able to block attempts to change direction. Their vision is small and mires us in stagnation. The elections of 2022 will tell us more about how many Ameri-

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cans buy into this fearful mindset.

Voter suppression is underway, an attempt to limit voter access for people of color. We are forced to put our attention on random acts of violence rather than random acts of kindness. We fail to understand that infrastructure includes people and not simply bridges and roads. And so on.

It is unclear to us and to many whether

democracy will survive, and that is scary. Why would a young couple, who are lucky enough to have choice, choose to live in America? What do we offer in the way of resiliency and hope?

Maybe the incentive to help explore a more creative vision is enough motivation. People worldwide believe that we are a country that can do it. And maybe we can, with political will. Maybe we can grow our vision by electing more ethnically and racially diverse, informed people to make healthy decisions for our country, decisions that offer safety, opportunity, and exclude no one. Maybe we can agree that we want all our children to have safe housing and a good education.

My grandson and his wife want to raise their children among family. It is important to have the support of grandparents, aunts and uncles. Privilege allows them to act on the hopes of refugees and immigrants here and everywhere who have the same dream.

Will we act on hope and use the democratic privilege we currently have to work for causes and elect people who believe that all individuals and families in America and elsewhere deserve shelter, health care, education and equal opportunity?

Without that, how can any of us make good choices for our children, all of whom are precious?

Janet Whitney lives in Bend.