

Opinion

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Saving money in Salem

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

Just two years ago, Democrats in the Oregon Legislature and Gov. Kate Brown made a sensible move. Faced with a budget shortfall, they changed health care insurance coverage for public employees so they weren't entitled to double coverage. Now, with the full support of our governor, they're about to undo the good they did in 2017.

The 2017 law made health insurance for public employees similar to that available to workers in private business. It ended the right of two public employees in a single household to have primary coverage on two separate insurance policies.

Government agencies, which pick up most of the premium cost for public employees' health insurance, would save nearly \$178 million in the 2019-21 biennium — if the cost-savings stays in place. Savings are expected to increase as time goes on.

That money is just as important today as it was in 2017. When the law was written the state faced a revenue shortfall of \$1.6 billion, if it kept spending like it was. And that was despite a booming economy and increasing revenues.

Oregon faces similar challenges today. The Democrats in control of the Legislature have shown an unwillingness to reform the retirement benefits for public employees and are even inclined to reinstate double health care coverage for public employees.

During the 2016 campaign for the state's top job Brown said: "Oregonians deserve to know that every cent of their money is being spent wisely and that state government is accountable to them." To her credit, she has been pushing for the state to improve its system for buying goods and services. That may save the state millions — she says "hundreds of millions of dollars." That would be great.

But why lose some of the progress Oregon has made in saving money by reversing double health insurance coverage for public employees?



Your views

Green New Deal is a start to addressing U.S. issues

I see two pivotal issues confronting our dear country. We face extreme wealth inequality that has produced widespread poverty (over 40 percent of working families in Baker County cannot make ends meet) and a withering infrastructure. We face global warming that has gone from scientific prediction to in-your-face disasters. Additionally, we are afflicted by a dysfunctional, topsy-turvy health insurance "system."

There are rational, straightforward answers to these major challenges, but they have been largely papered over. Anti-government dogma and unlimited campaign contributions have stifled our Constitution's promise to "promote the general welfare."

Thank goodness that I'm now finding hope and optimism from a new generation of intelligent, articu-

late leaders who are determined to overcome the hurdles, face our major challenges, and meet the real needs of everyday Americans in a meaningful way.

Foremost, I'm so impressed by the presence of U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Two facets of her aspirational Green New Deal framework are already being spelled out in newly introduced congressional legislation. One makes major increases in federal income supplements to counter 45 years of stagnant wages. Another creates enhanced Medicare for All.

In addition, the many candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination promise to enliven a wide-ranging discussion and debate on our national purpose and policies. For one remarkable example, entrepreneur and educator Andrew Yang offers 90 policy proposals (including a \$1,000

per month Universal Basic Income) at www.yang2020.com.

And the older generation is contributing, as well. In January, 45 eminent economists — including three former chairs of the Federal Reserve and numerous Nobel laureates — called for a refundable carbon tax with a substantial rebate as "the simple and straightforward solution to global warming."

Yes, there will be many attacks on this spirited drive for relevancy and real answers. (The absurd political cartoon and "Green New Deal: Be serious" op-ed in the Herald on April 8 are examples.)

I urge my fellow readers to get involved in the vigorous debate we deserve, and support a sustained effort by "we the people" to craft a government that works for all of us.

Marshall McComb
Baker City

Letters to the editor

• We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.

• The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.

• Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.
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Humbled by meetings with America's veterans

I recently read a fine new book about the Korean war and it occurred to me, with the suddenness of an epiphany, that I have interviewed veterans of every major war in which American troops were involved over the past century.

This ought to make me feel older than I am.

But in reality it is mere happenstance, a coincidence of time, that has afforded me the irreplaceable opportunity to meet so many authentic heroes and to hear their stories, both the horrific and the inspiring.

When I started in the news business in 1992 there were still a relative handful of World War I veterans around, although even then the youngest of that cadre were in their early 90s.

I was fortunate enough, one afternoon in 1994, to sit down in a modest home on H Street in Baker City and listen as one of those men, Herman Steiger, described what he had seen almost 80 years earlier in the mud-splattered trenches of France.

I have never felt as privileged, before or since, to tell anyone's story as I was to tell even a small part of Herman Steiger's.

Steiger, who died on June 16, 1997, was a fixture in Baker City, but not because he was a veteran.

Indeed his military service as a volunteer, as commendable as it certainly was, did not define his legacy.

I suspect many Baker City



JAYSON JACOBY

residents did not know Steiger had been a soldier.

Steiger's greatest contribution, I believe, was his dedication to the children of Baker City. It is a record that when I think of it, more than two decades after his death, still makes my throat constrict and my eyes feel wet and heavy as I consider how immense a man's influence can be when his selflessness is so consistent, his affinity so absolute for children who are not his own.

(Herman and his beloved wife, Blanche, who died in 1996, were married for 60 years but they did not have children.)

When he retired and returned to his hometown in 1964, Steiger became the most loyal fan of Baker High School athletics — in particular of the football, baseball and wrestling teams.

He attended not only games but also practices, sitting, most days, in a lawn chair he lugged along.

When teams traveled for games and meets Steiger would talk to the coach before the bus pulled out and pass over a sheaf of bills to ensure the kids were well-fed.

He and Blanche left their estate to the Baker Sports Complex, the largest single donation to that ex-

cellent facility north of Baker High School. A baseball/softball field there bears his name.

But it is a different sport — football — and a different stadium, that I associate most directly with Herman Steiger.

That's Baker Bulldog Memorial Stadium. It was dedicated on Sept. 13, 1985, with a plaque honoring two BHS graduates and former athletes — Claude Hines, and Steiger.

I walk past the stadium often and although most times my thoughts are otherwise occupied, occasionally, as I glance at the grandstand on the west side of the field, I remember Steiger.

I remember the one time I saw him there, clad in his red-and-black mackinaw, a slight man, his back stooped with age but his eyes still so bright and so alive as the boys — his boys, his Bulldogs — ran onto the green field below.

I remember, and I think that when fall comes round again and the boys don their shoulder pads and their helmets, that I ought to buy my ticket one Friday night so I can walk in and pay a silent tribute to Steiger.

I know just where to go. I would start at the bottom of Section C and climb the stairs to Row 10 and shuffle over to seats 1-4. That's where Steiger sat on so many Fridays, on soft September nights when summer held on, on chilly November afternoons when the Bulldogs had a playoff game in a

snowstorm.

I would sit there, maybe, if the seats weren't taken. And if they were I would pass by and pause for just a moment and honor, as best as I can, the man whose place this was, and will always be for as long as it stands.

Herman Steiger is not of course the only veteran I've interviewed who is no longer around.

These days it's the veterans of the war that followed Steiger's war whose ranks, already thin, each day show new gaps, more empty spaces.

The youngest veterans of World War II are in their early 90s, just as Steiger was when I met him a quarter century ago.

And those who fought in Korea, some of whose sacrifices are described in terrible detail in the book I mentioned, are many of them just as old.

The book is "On Desperate Ground: The Marines at the Reservoir, the Korean War's Greatest Battle," by Hampton Sides.

The titular battle is the one fought at the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea during November and December of 1950, the war's first year, when the First Marine Division was ambushed, and in some places surrounded, by Chinese soldiers.

It is an excellent book. Although the Korean War is sometimes known as "the forgotten war," in part because it happened relatively soon after World War II and in part because it had nothing like

the societal effects of the Vietnam War, rarely if ever have Americans fought in such awful conditions as during the Chosin Reservoir campaign.

Hundreds of Marines and soldiers suffered severe frostbite — many had fingers, toes and even hands and feet amputated — when temperatures plummeted to polar levels.

So far as I can remember — and my computer files seem to agree — I've interviewed only one Korean War veteran. I met with Dick Collier in his Baker City home in 1998, when he was 68.

(Dick was killed, along with his wife, Tina, in a car crash on Interstate 84 near North Powder in December 2009.)

Collier fought at the Chosin Reservoir. He told me he slept on the ground when the temperature dropped to 49 below zero. He was, as are many veterans, hard of hearing. In Collier's case this was all but inevitable, as he was an artilleryman who fired 105-millimeter howitzers.

Over the ensuing years I've met veterans from Vietnam and the Gulf War and the War on Terror, including soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I was in every case humbled.

Whatever challenges I had recently endured immediately seemed trivial by comparison.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.