

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Sweet deal for state workers

Did your income stagnate, or rise only slightly, in the years after the major recession a decade or so ago?

If you answered yes, you have something in common, in terms of compensation for your labor, with many state employees represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

But that's probably about the only thing.

Are you expecting to get raises adding up to 10% to 15% over the next two years? And a 3% cost-of-living boost? Are your health insurance premiums staying steady? Can you cash in a week's worth of vacation pay every year if you maintain at least 60 hours in reserve?

Statistics suggest that relatively few private sector workers could answer yes to all, or even any, of those questions. Yet 24,000 state workers represented by SEIU are in line to get those benefits in a two-year contract that's possible because the Oregon Legislature, even as it was boosting taxes and fees for residents, set aside \$200 million for state employee pay hikes.

It's reasonable for the state to try to make up, partially, for workers' lean years in the past. One reason lawmakers could do so is that Oregon's economy has improved, yielding higher private sector incomes and thus tax revenue.

But double-digit increases are exorbitant. Baker County's annual increase in per capita income averaged 2.6% from 2010-17. The average during the 2000s was 1.6%.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



GUEST EDITORIAL

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

Bill Currier, chairman of the Oregon Republican Party, wants to recall Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat. If Brown showed contempt for limits of the state constitution by abusing her power as governor, who would be against recalling her?

But she has not. The recall is hare-brained hyperventilation.

Currier's argument for recalling Brown has layers. He said she has "threatened to usurp legislative power with executive orders to implement her failed legislation, deciding single-handedly what is best for Oregon."

What has she actually done? Brown was disappointed that cap-and-trade legislation, House Bill 2020, died. She believes it's critical for the state to reduce greenhouse gases to tamp down wildfires, protect the ocean from acidifying, prevent declines in agri-

cultural yields and more. And what she said she would do is: "I am also directing my staff and agencies to explore alternative paths in case these collaborative approaches do not lead to successful legislation. This includes the use of my executive powers and direction of state agencies."

We have editorialized against HB 2020 and believe it was flawed for a number of reasons. But Brown has not actually done anything to violate the state constitution.

Currier also criticized passage of a bill that would enable the state to issue driver's licenses to unauthorized immigrants. Yes, voters overturned a similar law when it was put on the ballot just a few years ago in 2014. But Brown did nothing to abuse her power by signing into law a new bill passed by the Legislature.

Currier criticized the state's new

hidden business sales tax, passed by the 2019 Legislature and signed into law by Brown. We have editorialized against that tax. Oregon taxes should be broadly based and not hidden from consumers. Voters rejected at the ballot a very similar tax just a few years ago. Again, what did Brown do that violated the state constitution? Nothing.

Brown's leadership of the state is grounds for debate, criticism and sometimes even praise. She does things Currier disagrees with. She does things we disagree with. That's no reason to go all hide-the-children and recall her. It's reason for Currier and the rest of the GOP to convince Oregonians they have a better plan and, therefore, to elect their candidates.

Would Americans back another moonshot?

The phones were about as portable as a sectional sofa, the music was analog and the TVs, like as not, were black-and-white.

But we put a man on the moon.

Four of them, actually.

So whatever 1969 lacked in technology — and phones, music and TVs by no means constitute anything like a complete list — it can lord its two moon landings over 2019, and 2019, with its half century lead, can't even begin to muster a cogent retort.

Apollo 11 is by far the more famous, of course, by virtue of being the first mission to deliver humans to the moon on July 20, 1969. But Apollo 12, in November of that year, put Pete Conrad and Alan Bean on the moon.

America, it must be said, has no pressing interest these days in propelling astronauts to Earth's single natural satellite.

Although a mere 12 people (all Americans, and all men) have walked on the lunar surface — scarcely enough to field a football squad — and none since 1972, I doubt we'd glean any knowledge that would greatly improve our society by following in the dusty footsteps of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin.

But I'm also not convinced we're equal to the task despite the announcement by Vice President Mike Pence this spring that the current goal is to return astronauts to the moon by 2024.

The problem isn't technology.

At least I hope that wouldn't prove to be an impediment.

I am depressed by the prospect that our nation, having devoted much of the past half century to comparatively trivial matters such as making it possible to carry a library's worth of music in a device smaller than a credit card, might have let its capacities atrophy so severely that it is incapable of confronting the type of immense



JAYSON JACOBY

challenge, of which the space race was one, that once made us seem indomitable.

But I'm also realistic. I understand that even accounting for the advances we've made since 1969, in computer science among many other relevant disciplines, an effort as massive as the program that culminated with Apollo 11 can't be revived quickly.

That program's impetus is most often cited as President John F. Kennedy's May 1961 speech to Congress in which he famously proposed that America "should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to Earth."

But the foundation of the program that eight years later accomplished that audacious feat — the research into rocketry, telemetry and a host of other subjects that tested even those with the highest IQs — dated to the 1950s and in many cases decades earlier.

I have recently been pondering our adventures beyond Earth's atmosphere not only because the 50th anniversary of Armstrong's small step has arrived, but also because I re-read James Michener's 1982 novel "Space."

As with many of the prolific author's books, "Space," though fictional, mixes in authentic history from America's space program.

For instance Michener, who died in 1997, doesn't exaggerate the scope of the nearly decade-long effort required to bring Armstrong and Aldrin to the Sea of Tranquility. Many of his characters are invented, but the intellectual obstacles they had to surmount are

quite real.

Around the same time I was reading "Space" I listened to the audio version of Robert Kurson's fine 2018 nonfiction account of the Apollo 8 mission, "Rocket Men."

Although Apollo 8 paved the way to the moon, so to speak (asphalt, of course, being of little value in space), like most of the other Apollo missions it's nothing like as famous as Apollo 11.

Astronauts Jim Lovell (far better known for his participation in a failed mission, Apollo 13, than for the successful Apollo 8), Frank Borman and Bill Anders were the first crew to pilot a spacecraft to, and indeed around, the moon.

Their journey in December 1968 was a necessary part of the sequence that led to Apollo 11's historic landing seven months later.

Although "Space" and "Rocket Men" are quite different books — even accounting for the former being a novel — they affected me in a similar way. I came away from both with an intense appreciation for the bravery of those men who let a 363-foot-tall rocket blast them into space, and with a rather heartwarming feeling for the commitment of American society that made the endeavor possible.

Which brings me back to my skepticism about whether, even given the chance, we could muster a similar level of support today.

I don't mean to suggest that the 1960s was a period of political placidity — anyone with a cursory knowledge of history would recognize how inane such a proposition is. Also, plenty of people back then balked at the immense cost of the space program.

One of the elements of "Rocket Men" that most interested me is Kurson's deft use of the social and political unrest of the 1960s as a backdrop — indeed, almost as an antithesis — to NASA's progress toward the moonshot.

It's a compelling conceit, the more so because it's true. Even as our nation seemed at times to be fraying worse than it had since the Civil War, America was also marching, in a way that with hindsight seems inevitable, to Armstrong's landmark stride into the lunar dust (the regolith, if you prefer a rather more scientific name for the stuff).

The comparison is especially dramatic when applied to 1968, the year that ended with Apollo 8's triumphant flight around the moon.

Many historians have ranked 1968 as America's most tumultuous year of the post-World War II era. Political scientist Bill Galston of the Brookings Institution calls 1968 "the worst year for American society since the Civil War."

The year's iconic events include the Tet Offensive that started in January in Vietnam, a stunning refutation of America's presumed military prowess; the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy in a two-month period in the spring; and the riots in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention in August.

Through all that and more, NASA's scientists and engineers, fearing the Soviet Union would beat us to the moon, worked feverishly to prepare for the launch of Apollo 8.

In a general sense 2019 can be said to resemble 1968.

There is widespread distrust of the federal government — most particularly of President Donald Trump.

And there is considerable anger on both sides of the political spectrum.

Yet the terrible violence that distinguished 1968 — the assassinations and Vietnam protests and urban riots — is conspicuous by its absence.

I can't venture an educated guess as to why this is so. But it seems to me plausible that a contributing

factor is that in 2019 we can — and indeed tens of millions of us routinely do — express our dissatisfaction in a purely digital, which is to say nonphysical — way.

We don't punch.

We tweet.

This is a good thing, in some ways.

Even the nastiest tweet won't crack your skull, for instance.

But I fear that the internet revolution might have fractured society in a more fundamental way than the actual, rather than figurative, confrontations of the 1960s did.

I wonder whether the same technology that allows us to fight our battles remotely, rather than tussling in the streets, hasn't also siphoned from the citizenry our capacity to subsume our personal beliefs to support a great, but apolitical, national goal.

Indeed I wonder if there even exists such a thing as an apolitical goal.

In 1968 Americans fought in the streets over momentous matters — wars and assassinations and civil rights.

Today we engage in bloodless cyberbattles over vaccination, something that half a century ago we recognized, with deadly epidemics relatively fresh in our collective memory, as the lifesaving medical miracle that it was, and remains.

I fear that any president, even one less controversial than Trump, who tried to give a speech in homage to JFK's 1961 "send a man to the moon" address would, even as he or she inspired many Americans, also like as not provoke only a sort of juvenile disdain among a great many others.

I'll leave it to you to imagine the sophomoric Facebook posts that would follow, as inevitable as morrels after a mild spring rain.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.