

EDITORIAL

Seeking to unify the country

President Joe Biden spoke repeatedly of unity during his inaugural address on Wednesday, Jan. 20 in Washington, D.C.

He spoke with eloquence and passion on the theme that defined his speech.

“To restore the soul and secure the future of America requires so much more than words,” Biden said. “It requires the most elusive of all things in a democracy. Unity. Unity.”

Biden gave his inspiring remarks while about 25,000 National Guard troops waited for a possible repeat of the Jan. 6 invasion of the U.S. Capitol by supporters of Donald Trump who contend Biden’s victory was the result of election fraud.

That fear was unfounded.

There were no riots at the U.S. Capitol or at state Capitols, many of which, including Oregon’s in Salem, had additional security on Wednesday.

But the situation was not so tranquil in Portland or Seattle. In both cities the situation was similar to what happened on dozens of nights this summer, as protesters broke windows and clashed with police. In Portland they damaged the headquarters of the Democratic Party of Oregon. In Seattle they smashed windows at a federal courthouse.

These people weren’t questioning the election, or advocating for Trump. They called for, among other things, abolishing the federal Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agency.

The troubling conclusion is that replacing Trump is no panacea to the social and political upheaval that, along with the pandemic, has defined America for most of a year. It’s obvious that some people don’t subscribe to the concept of unity that the new president proposed. And it may well be that the biggest impediments to the rosy future Biden described are not the people who voted for Trump.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

Hoping for Biden to have success

Editorial from The Chicago Tribune:

When he accepted the Democratic presidential nomination, Joe Biden knew if he won the election, he would be facing enormous challenges: curbing a deadly pandemic, reviving a struggling economy, alleviating the hardship of jobless workers, combating racial injustice and restoring the world’s trust in American leadership. “History,” he said, “has delivered us to one of the most difficult moments America has ever faced.”

But in the months since Election Day, the moment has gotten more difficult than he could have imagined. He takes over just two weeks after a violent attack on the U.S. Capitol that was aimed at upending his victory, incited by a defeated incumbent desperate to stay in the White House. Having lost his office, Donald Trump now faces an impeachment trial that could bar him from ever running again — and that may shadow his successor’s first weeks.

Biden’s inauguration will take place in a city that resembles a military encampment with 20,000 National Guard troops on hand to deter and, if necessary, suppress violence by radical extremists. Among them are 200 members of the

Illinois National Guard. Airman Bridget Wood spoke not only for herself but for millions of Americans when she told the Tribune, “You’d have to be a little crazy if you didn’t feel nervous.”

Under the circumstances, we count it as a bit of perverse good fortune that the pandemic has greatly curtailed inaugural activities and attendance. Most of the events will be virtual, easing the security challenge.

This is an extraordinarily tense and uncertain moment in American history. But Biden has approached it with grace, empathy and resolve. He has assembled an experienced and able team of Cabinet officers and advisers. He has laid out a plan to combat COVID-19 and boost the economy. He has reached out to Republicans on Capitol Hill in hopes of finding common ground. He has left the impeachment up to Congress, choosing to focus on matters of more immediate concern to ordinary Americans.

A veteran of the Senate who spent eight years at the side of President Barack Obama, with voluminous experience on foreign as well as domestic policy, Biden can hit the ground running. A sober realist with a penchant for incremen-

tal reform and restrained language, he promises to neutralize some of the bitter animosity that has poisoned our politics the past four years.

He also understands the urgent need for Americans to pay greater attention to what unites us than what drives us apart. “This must be an American moment,” he said in accepting the nomination. “It’s a moment that calls for hope and light and love. Hope for our futures, light to see our way forward, and love for one another.”

We expect that we will often disagree with the new administration, particularly when it comes to taxes, spending and regulation. But it will be a relief to have a president who takes policy seriously, bases it on reliable data and heeds the counsel of people with genuine expertise. It will be a refreshing change to have a president who believes in engaging his opponents in civil debate.

Every president has the job of making the federal government work to improve the lives of the American people. Biden faces the far greater challenge of rescuing our democracy and restoring our sense of unity at a moment when both are in danger. In those critical tasks, every American should hope for his success.

Censorship, and avoiding cyber cesspools

At the risk of sounding hopelessly naive, I find it depressing just how much we depend on social media to communicate.

Of course I know how ubiquitous the various digital platforms are.

I dabble in these virtual public squares myself, although this is largely due to professional obligations rather than personal interest.

But reading about how many tens of millions of users one site boasts, or how many followers Donald Trump has (or at least had) on another, is a stultifying exercise. The heart of the story gets buried in an avalanche of statistics.

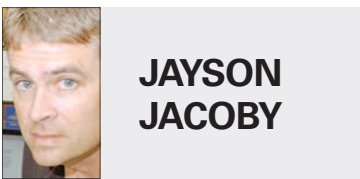
Numbers, even huge numbers, can’t reveal how powerful these cyber outlets have become with anything like the visceral reality of the outcry that blared nationwide when the tech industry, in the wake of the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol, started clamping figurative hands over so many figurative mouths.

Charges of censorship resounded.

Donald Trump Jr., who had better luck with Twitter than his old man did, tweeted “Free Speech Is Under Attack! Censorship is happening like NEVER before! Don’t let them silence us.”

The younger Trump is right in one sense, albeit not, I expect, in the way he meant.

America indeed hasn’t seen this sort of censorship — but only because, for the vast majority of our nation’s history, there were no Facebook pages to censor, Twitter accounts to cancel or Parler apps to squelch.



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But in the sense that this level of nationwide censorship is unprecedented, which it seems to me is what Trump Jr. is claiming, the historical record tells quite a different tale.

It happens that just a few days before the Capitol was briefly occupied by the sorts of people who think taking selfies with their feet propped on Nancy Pelosi’s desk is a patriotic act — no Paul Reveres or Patrick Henrys in that crowd — I finished reading a most interesting book.

The title of Harold Holzer’s 2020 work neatly summarizes the topic: “The Presidents vs. the Press: The Endless Battle between the White House and the Media — from the Founding Fathers to Fake News.”

That I was reading this book while the nation is embroiled in a controversy over free speech was pure happenstance, but it was an instructive sort of coincidence.

Holzer examines in depressing detail how past presidents didn’t merely resort to calling journalists nasty names, but actually wielded the federal government’s immense power to prevent the public from reading reporters’ words.

This is not a trivial difference.

Most obviously, when the government stifles speech, whether that

speech is the work of journalists or somebody scribbling away in his basement, it is violating the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

During the Civil War, for instance, President Abraham Lincoln’s administration physically closed newspapers that opposed the war. Federal officials arrested some editors and held them without trial.

Woodrow Wilson, who served as president during America’s involvement in World War I, was if anything more aggressive.

Wilson signed the Espionage Act in June 1917 and the Sedition Act in May 1918. Under the auspices of those repressive laws, the Wilson administration banned certain publications from being delivered by the Postal Service, and arrested at least one editor under the Espionage Act.

Holzer shows, however, that the grim spectacle of presidents censoring the press is not merely part of our nation’s less enlightened, but hardly relevant, past.

Indeed, he notes that some watchdog groups concluded that President Barack Obama’s vow to oversee the most “transparent” administration in U.S. history was a cruel fiction.

Obama even resurrected Wilson’s noxious Espionage Act, which had largely been forgotten, and cited that statute in naming Fox News reporter James Rosen as a “criminal co-conspirator” for publishing sensitive information about North Korea’s nuclear weapon program.

Federal agents also seized phone records from Rosen’s office, home and cellphone.

What Obama did not do, of course, was call legitimate media outlets “fake news” and berate them on a nearly daily basis, as his successor did.

Holzer addresses the difference between the two approaches in the final paragraph of his chapter on Obama’s presidency.

“Barack Obama may not have called hostile journalists “enemies of the people.” But those whom his administration tried to isolate or prosecute might argue that some of his actions spoke louder than his successor’s words.”

The censorship that the Trumps, both junior and senior, along with many others have maligned recently is a decidedly different concoction, despite sharing a bitter flavor with government-imposed stifling of speech.

Facebook and the other social media companies, though they obviously restrict the expression of ideas, are not bound by the First Amendment as the government is.

These companies’ brand of censorship, though inconsistent and fairly blatant in targeting voices from the right side of the political spectrum, represents no risk to the sanctity of the Constitution.

(Whether it’s a wise business practice is another matter.)

What saddens me is how relatively quickly we have as a society come to a sorry state where we measure our freedom to express

ourselves by such things as posting comments on Facebook, or tapping out a biting tweet.

Perhaps equally unfortunate, we have not turned these sources of communication into an immediate and ubiquitous version of an old-fashioned coffee klatch, distinguished by the good-natured banter that nostalgic term implies. Instead we have created, in the online marketplace of ideas, something more akin to a street riot, with superfluous capitalizations and exclamation points standing in for fists and clubs.

The pandemic undoubtedly has contributed to this trend by depriving us, to varying degrees, of actual face-to-face conversations. These personal interactions, though they unfortunately enable the exchange of the dreaded droplets, are also less likely to devolve into an exchange of virus-free but still infectious diatribes.

But we needn’t be subject to the partisan whims of the digital oligarchs.

Until we can resume the regular conversations that are so vital to constructive human discourse, we can still talk to each other in a more personal, less anonymous venue than the increasingly odoriferous cyber cesspools.

Almost every one of us carries one of these devices wherever we go.

And they work just as well for talking as for tweeting.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.