

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Ease the burden on businesses

Many businesses in Baker County and elsewhere in Oregon have suffered from incessant uncertainty for more than a year due to the pandemic, and it's time for Gov. Kate Brown to relieve some of that onerous burden.

The governor needs to replace, or at least to change, the two-week COVID-19 risk level system that's been in place for almost four months.

Mark Bennett, a Baker County commissioner, said problems with the system are a common topic when he talks with business owners. Most notably, because risk levels can change every two weeks — and potentially change dramatically — business owners can't reasonably predict such basic, and crucial, elements as how many employees they'll need to schedule, and the volume of supplies they'll need to order. This is particularly problematic for restaurants, which use so many perishable items.

Baker County's COVID-19 trends over the past two months don't justify the two-week system. Since mid-January the county's rate of new cases has been well below what it was during November and December, and the general trend has been downward.

After recording 196 new cases during December, an average of 6.3 cases per day, Baker County's numbers have dropped to 106 cases in January (3.4 per day) and to 70 cases in February (2.5 per day). Through 22 days in March, the rate was 1.9 cases per day.

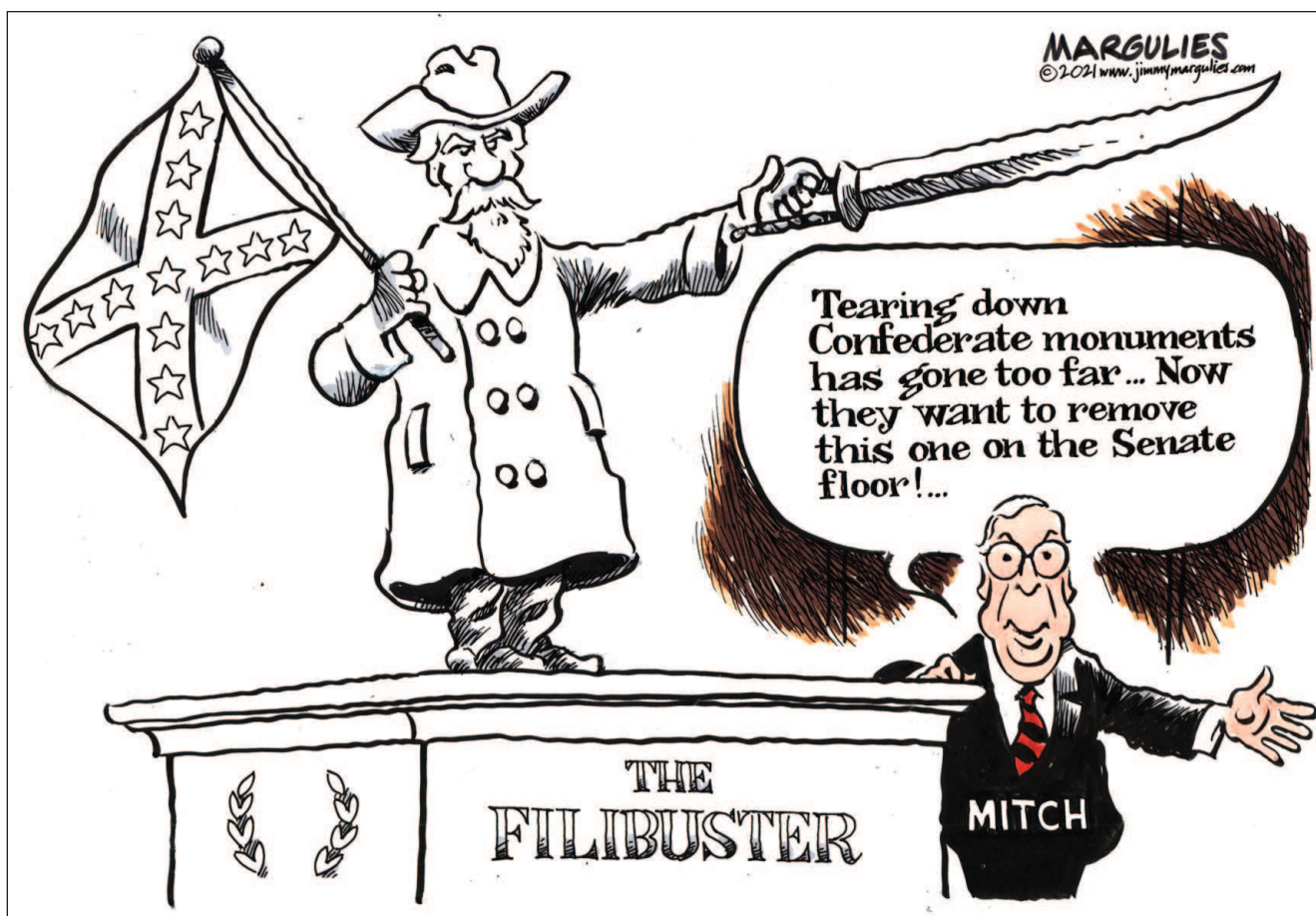
Fortunately, since Feb. 12 the county has been in either the lowest or the second-lowest of the four-level risk system, meaning businesses have been subject to less-stringent restrictions than for counties in the high or extreme category.

Yet as Bennett points out, a single large outbreak in a care facility or workplace could move the county into either of those categories, even though such an isolated situation wouldn't reflect a significant risk of the virus spreading in the community. Outbreaks at Settler's Park and at Behlen Mfg. Co. are largely responsible for the county moving from the lowest to the moderate category for the two-week period starting March 12. The county will return to the lowest of the risk levels Friday, March 26, because new cases dropped from 44 in the prior two-week measuring period to 24 in the most recent, which ended March 20.

The governor should assure Baker County, and other counties with similar COVID-19 trends, that they will remain at the lowest risk, not for just two weeks but unless the COVID-19 situation dictates otherwise. If an outbreak occurs in the meantime, the state should allow the Baker County Health Department to decide whether the risk of wider community spread is sufficient to impose stricter regulations temporarily.

State officials also need to focus on the current restrictions on businesses and other activities, some of which might be as outdated as the two-week risk level system.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Free thought is being threatened

By Keith C. Burris

Free speech, and so free thought, is under threat in America today.

We are not committed to it.

Free speech means nothing if it does not apply to people and ideas that upset us.

The doctrine of free speech is something like this: The people we most need to hear from are the people we least want to hear from.

But these days we are defining free speech and thought down and defining disagreement up.

Most political and cultural disagreement is now considered to be upsetting and divisive, rather than interesting and constructive. We Americans are no longer much interested in exploring each other's minds and backgrounds. We are far more interested in defending our pet assumptions and prejudices.

Differing views therefore often create the feeling of being discomfited, even unsafe.

National Review writer Kevin D. Williamson was hired by The Atlantic magazine some months ago, presumably in the interest of intellectual diversity. When it became clear that, in his new home, he would continue to be himself and take positions quite at odds with most of The Atlantic family, and in his own voice, the office outrage was palpable and the Twitter mob descended. He had to be unhired within days of his hiring.

Andrew Sullivan left New York magazine saying: "A critical mass of the staff and management at New York Magazine and Vox Media no longer want to associate with me." He said fellow staffers believed his columns were "physically harming" them. His sin? Though a classical liberal on many issues and generally Democratic in his politics, he dubs himself a conservative, and is conservative on such matters as immigration, religion and gender.

So, disagreement equals discomfort, which requires separation.

But discomfiting disagreements may also be cast as "hate speech," and therefore verbal assault: Suppose a person walks into a gathering of the self-anointed virtuous, maybe even an "inclusive" church, and mentions that he is a member of the NRA, protests at an abortion clinic each Saturday and voted for Donald Trump. He might be viewed

as more than discomfiting. He might be viewed as disturbing and perhaps threatening. He might well be asked to leave.

How about a Biden supporter at a "praise" church? Or a person in a "Black Lives Matter" T-shirt in a rural Ohio or Pennsylvania greasy spoon? How would they be welcomed?

This sort of sensitivity — elevating disagreement to threat — was almost unheard of 50 years ago, when the country was more easygoing and people had a sense of proportion and humor about politics.

A friend of mine recently saw what he thought had been an up-till-then pleasant date end abruptly. "You are too conservative for me," the woman said. She left a small tip and exited, stage left.

Are relationships to be subjected to political litmus tests now? So much for Tracy and Hepburn in "Adam's Rib" in which Tracy's penultimate line is "vive la difference." So much for James Carville and Mary Matalin, in real life. And so much for two equally great Americans and jurists, Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whose affection for each other, opera and travel transcended their disagreements about everything else.

I want to live in an America in which affection transcends politics.

If one is more than the sum of his words and thoughts, and assumes this is true of others, he can love a man, as my Dad did his brother and his brother loved him, and think his politics daft.

But many, maybe most, of my fellow Americans currently disagree.

I have "blue" friends who not only will not contemplate living in a red state but will not vacation in one. I have "red" friends who say California and New York are Gomorrah and ought to secede from the union. They will not willingly travel to either.

A hard-core Trumper, maybe even a soft-core one, will tell you that no mercy will be shown Joe Biden: He's senile. He's a dupe of the left. He gets no honeymoon, no chance, no assumption of goodwill from us. He's not my president. "We will mess him up at every turn and create social as well as political havoc."

By the way, that's speech. It may be mean, stupid, unpatriotic and irresponsible. But it is protected.

Which brings me to point No. 2: There really is a slippery slope to canceled

speech and canceled history.

If Winston Churchill, both Roosevelts and Thomas Jefferson, along with Dr. Seuss are canceled, no one is safe.

No one will ever be pure enough.

Pick a good guy, pick a hero — John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington — they all, all, had fatal flaws.

Human beings err. Great men and women have blind spots, fallow times, dark times.

What the cancel culture cannot see is that eventually, everyone gets gone. For if flaws in the good guys mean they must be erased, those of us who are more flawed and less gifted will surely not be spared.

And there will be someone who says "free speech for me but not thee — definitely not thee," for each and every one of us.

There is a moral ground for free speech and we must till and tend it: It is the assumption of goodwill, comity, listening and a sense of fair play — four sides of humility.

For empiricists and historians, the necessity of a humble and open mind is the fickle nature of all times, trends and passing wisdom.

For the classical liberal, it is the marketplace of ideas: There are no ultimate truths so we must keep seeking, debating, learning and refining.

For the classical conservative, there are ultimate truths, like God, decency, loyalty, bravery and tradition. But these can only be revealed and defended in the arena — in the contest of words, ideas and leadership.

But left and right today are united in their illiberality, their intolerance and their arrogance. Both sides wish to live in echo chambers, be only with people like themselves, have their own facts and, indeed, their own journalism and history, which affirm their tribal oaths.

How do we till the ground for free speech?

Let the other guy speak. Assume he loves the country, too. Respect the things that he knows that you may not. Listen awhile. Let affection trump opinion.

Keith C. Burris is editor, vice president and editorial director of Block Newspapers. Email: kburris@post-gazette.com.

OTHER VIEWS

Editorial from New York Daily News:

In practice, the standard for when elected officials insist that a governing colleague must resign following accusations of misconduct, before an independent investigation or an impeachment proceeding has been conducted, is reminiscent of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous 1964 definition of what constitutes hard-core pornography: "I know it when I see it."

There simply aren't set-in-stone moral codes delineating what behavior is so egregious, that even when unproved, that it warrants a politician's immediate, voluntary departure from public office. That vagueness often leads to logical and moral inconsistencies. And political expediency.

Is a single criminal complaint of choking your wife during a fight qualitatively less bad than

the multiple accusations of sexual harassment and unwanted physical contact New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo is now facing? Hard to say.

But if it is, that would explain the relative silence from state lawmakers about Bronx state Sen. Luis Sepúlveda, who was arrested on Jan. 12 on charges he choked his wife during a domestic dispute. Sepúlveda claimed his wife also physically attacked him and firmly denied the charges, and his attorney says the wife's complaint was "a calculated attempt by a disgruntled party to leverage a divorce settlement."

Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins properly and immediately stripped Sepúlveda of his committee chairmanship, which just happened to be the Crime Victims, Crime And Correction panel, saying "I take these allegations extremely seriously and will be monitoring this

situation closely." But not seriously enough for her nor anyone else to demand that Sepúlveda immediately resign. And there have been no moves to expel him. But Stewart-Cousins says that Cuomo must go.

Meanwhile, GOP Rep. Tom Reed from western New York is now being accused by a former lobbyist of drunkenly groping her and unhooking her bra at a bar during a 2017 outing after a day of ice-fishing. Reed has for weeks been among the lawmakers of both parties calling loudly for Cuomo to resign or face impeachment for his various alleged misdeeds.

Will fellow Republicans like Reps. Nicole Malliotakis, who started a petition calling upon Cuomo to immediately resign, and Elise Stefanik, who called Cuomo a "criminal sexual predator" and demanded that he quit office at once, seek Reed's ouster too?

Speaking of hypocrisy, it was just a few days ago that Cuomo insisted that naysayers and politicians calling for his removal should instead wait for the conclusion of the attorney general's independent investigation into the sexual harassment accusations.

"Wait for the facts," Cuomo said last week. And yet, word comes that Cuomo's office has begun its own parallel inquiry into allegations made by a current employee that he groped her. If Cuomo really believes the AG's independent investigation should be the arbiter of the facts, then why would he conduct his own, separate and unsolicited probe? If he really believes in the value of an independent investigation to suss out the truth, then why did members of his administration leak unflattering details of one of his accusers' state personnel file to reporters? Never expect consistency in politics.