

EDITORIAL

Celebrate Baker's graduates

The list of traditional activities that Baker High School seniors have lost over the past 15 months makes for a depressing litany.

Homecoming. Prom. Sports and many other extracurricular activities. Dozens of days in their classrooms with their classmates and teachers.

The Class of 2020 had a normal senior year until just before spring break in March 2020. But for the final three months of their last year at BHS, nothing was normal. No in-person classes. No sports. No traditional graduation ceremony at Baker Bulldog Memorial Stadium.

The Class of 2021 endured upheaval from the start. They had online classes for the first two months of the school year. Then they attended in-person classes for one day for several weeks, then two days until late January. Not until April 12 did seniors (along with other high school and middle school students) return to a regular four-day week of in-person classes.

The Class of 2021 has had a full slate of sports, but an ersatz version, with shortened seasons and no officially sanctioned playoffs and state tournaments.

This year's graduates will have something closer to a normal graduation than their counterparts did a year ago. Commencement will happen in the stadium, although attendance will be limited.

Deprived of the usual ceremony last year, the Class of 2020, after accepting their diplomas in a drive-thru format, drove along 10th, Broadway and Main streets, parade-style, while well-wishers braved rain showers and cool temperatures to wave and applaud from the sidewalks. It was a fine tribute.

This year's vehicle procession isn't part of the official school schedule, but the senior class is inviting people to gather along Broadway and Main streets at noon on Sunday, June 6, prior to graduation. The route will start at 10th and Broadway, proceed east on Broadway to Main, then south to finish at Auburn Avenue.

Let's show the seniors, as we did a year ago, that we honor their achievements, even if we can't all do so in the traditional way. (And it's not going to rain, either.)

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



For the People Act is too broad

By John C. Fortier

The For the People Act is too broad and seeks to nationalize many democracy reforms that would be better left to states.

The first version of the act was launched in 2019, after Democrats had taken control of the House of Representatives. With Republicans in charge of the White House and the Senate, it had no chance of becoming law. It was aspirational, a statement of Democratic values on democracy reform, and a blueprint of an agenda for many specific policy changes that Democrats could highlight as contrasts to Republican policy.

And this blueprint was incredibly broad and ambitious: setting many federal standards for the way states administer elections, introducing forms of public financing of election campaigns, requiring very detailed independent redistricting commissions that would take away the power of redistricting from state legislatures, to name a few of the more prominent proposals.

But in these large brushstrokes and also in many of the details there was little bipartisan consensus for the reforms, some of which have been bitterly debated for years. In addition to the lack of agreement between the parties, the bill would overrule many future or existing state reforms that states would tailor for their own citizens.

Some Republicans incorrectly claim that voting laws are the province of the states and the states alone. More accurately, the Constitution allows states to craft election laws, but in most cases, Congress can enact federal laws that will preempt or overrule state laws. In practice, however, states have had the

preeminent role in elections, and only in specific instances has Congress stepped in with federal laws, with the result that American elections, unlike those of other countries, are extremely decentralized. States maintain significant differences in the way they run elections, from the balance of mail vs. in-person voting, the adoption of voting technology, the offices and questions that appear on ballots, to the hours of voting at polling places. Only in some very specific cases has Congress set federal standards by law: voting rights, "motor voter" registration, the post-2000 reforms and overseas voting, for example.

While such a decentralized election system can have flaws, states have often been engines for change. Major reform efforts such as the adoption of the secret ballot and the introduction of absentee voting and early in-person voting occurred state by state, without any federal mandate. If states are sometimes said to be laboratories of democracy, they can also be laboratories for democracy reform.

Fast forward to 2021, a Democrat is in the White House, and the party has narrow majorities in both the House and Senate. The For the People Act, which in 2019 had been more of a statement of principles, now seems like a transformational possibility for enthusiastic Democratic reformers. The difficulties that Democrats are now facing passing the act, however, stem from the mismatch between aspirations and reality. Republican support is almost nonexistent, so attracting 60 votes to invoke cloture in the Senate is extremely unlikely. Even without the filibuster, holding together

all 50 Democratic senators will be a challenge. And finally, opposition from states would also likely sink this large bill, as Democratic lawmakers and election officials may object to provisions that overrule their state reforms.

A more realistic avenue for democracy reforms is to take on reforms of a modest character one by one, and to take them on in the states. Democrat-controlled legislatures in Nevada and New Jersey, for example, implemented substantial changes to increase the usage of voting by mail.

And while there has been strong Democratic criticism of proposed election changes by Republican legislatures, they are much more likely to be enacted because they are much more modest than the For the People Act. First, they apply only to the state in question, not the nation as a whole. Second, while Democratic critics have been vocal, Republican reforms have been incremental, small changes to dates in mail and early voting, some regulation of the handling of mail ballots and election observers. Compare this to the hundreds of pages of reforms in the For the People Act.

Supporters of the For the People Act seem to think that because the subject is democracy reform, the normal rules of how bills are democratically passed do not apply. Democracy reforms will succeed as they have in the past only if they achieve some level of consensus at the federal level, or through the hard work of state by state reforms.

John C. Fortier is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. He wrote this for InsideSources.com.

In patience, Job has nothing on a T-ball coach

In the pantheon of patience, Job boasts the ultimate reputation.

But though it pains me to quibble with the biblical narrative, so far as I can determine from the historical record, Job never coached T-ball.

Which relegates him to second place in my book.

Or on deck, if you prefer.

Even Job, I suspect, would be unable to suppress a brief grimace while trying to guide a five-year-old toward first base when the kid is determined to sprint straight from home plate to second.

(Which, I have to admit, is logical to anyone who understands the value of a shortcut but is not terribly familiar with the rules of baseball. Which is a category that includes many five-year-olds.)

I had been away from T-ball for quite a number of years but the sport is much as I remember it.

Which is to say, an event with a facade of orderliness yet also a palpable sense that at any instant it could devolve into a debate involving tears, dust, and diminutive, grass-stained knees.

I have returned to the game, as a spectator, thanks to my grandson, Brysen, who turned four in February and is donning a leather glove and a



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cap for the first time this spring.

T-ball, notwithstanding the atmosphere of scarcely controlled chaos, is appealing in the way typical of games that involve small children gamboling about. Their energy is infectious, their antics inevitably amusing.

There is a unique cuteness to a kid of kindergarten age clad in a uniform, running for all she's worth, to stand in triumph on a base and then turn toward the bleachers, beaming and waving at her individual cheering section.

Brysen took to T-ball right off. He makes his way around the base paths with glee, and when he makes it safely to the next station he often crosses his arms across his little chest, as though to mark the accomplishment.

(Not that anyone has to worry about being tagged out. In T-ball all the players touch all the bases in each inning, of which there are two. Which is just the right number of innings.)

While watching Brysen's games I've found myself focusing, in between his and the other players' particularly funny shenanigans, on the coaches.

I can only marvel at their ability to handle a situation that, like certain radioactive isotopes, is inherently unstable and prone to explosive behavior.

Coaching on a field with a couple dozen four-, five- and six-year-olds is roughly akin to teaching a kindergarten class or running a daycare center, but with the added element of possibly being struck by an aluminum bat or beamed with a baseball.

I have many times winced, anticipating a painful blow, while watching a coach kneel beside the tee and help a player grip the bat in the proper way.

And even when the coaches are out in the field, safely out of bat range, they have to disassemble the wriggling mound of dusty humanity that forms almost every time a batted ball appears in the vicinity.

These coaches are, of course, volunteers.

They donate their time not for the prospects of glorious victories — score is not kept in T-ball, and there is no state tournament —

but so that kids can get outside and give their fine motor skills a workout.

This is no small contribution.

A neighbor lopped off the top of a tree a block or so to the west of our place and brought Elkhorn Peak right into our living room.

Rarely, if ever, have I more appreciated a bit of chain saw surgery. I noticed the arrival of the great sedimentary peak on a recent day when I was home for lunch. I was looking out the window at the west end of our house, mainly to gauge the volume of twigs our weeping willow had shed during the latest bout of gusts.

But as my eyes lifted from the yard to the horizon, I was taken aback by what I saw.

There was the familiar triangular tip of Elkhorn Peak, second-tallest summit in the range and, from most vantage points in Baker City, the dominant one.

As is often the case with familiar sights, I had never really seen that amputated tree's higher limbs until they were gone.

I've lived in my house for almost 26 years, but at that moment, as

I gazed at Elkhorn Peak, I felt almost as though the place were new to me.

Although Elkhorn Peak, at 8,931 feet, falls 175 feet short of its nearby neighbor, Rock Creek Butte, I've long had a special affinity for the former, mainly, I suspect, because I see it much more often.

It's not so precise as a calendar, to be sure, but I much prefer to gauge the succession of the seasons by having a look at Elkhorn Peak's steep east face. After a mid-winter storm it is pure white, all of its dark brown nubs of ancient stone temporarily plastered. During spring and summer the white splotches gradually shrink until, around the time August replaces July, the last bright patch disappears, leaving the peak barren, maybe for only two months but perhaps for as long as three and half, what with the vagaries of autumn storm.

Now, suddenly and unexpectedly, I can have a look at the peak while relaxing on the soft cushions of our sofa.

It's a revelation, as welcome as a new pair of contact lenses.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.