

GOP

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and Britain's Guardian newspaper. Twitter and Facebook spread the story around the globe.

In an extraordinarily swift and unanimous rebuke, the 23 members of the House Republican caucus signed a letter rejecting the Oregon Republican Party's official statement.

"There is no credible evidence to support false flag claims," the letter said. "Oregon is in crisis. Vaccines are not going to our most vulnerable, our students are still not in a safe classroom setting, main street businesses are in a tailspin, our health data is a mess and here we are, talking about a political party resolution."

It wasn't the first time lawmakers had to respond, dismiss or explain some action of a state political party whose decades-long political right-turn had outpaced even its increasingly conservative state representatives. As the party's size and influence has declined, the tension between those who carry the GOP banner outside and those inside the Capitol trying to influence policy has stretched nearer to a breaking point.

The lawmakers' letter didn't mention the House members or Trump's debunked claim that the election was stolen by President Joe Biden.

But with the Republicans facing a Democratic supermajority in both chambers of the Legislature just as the 2021 session began, many GOP lawmakers complained the state party was trying to score national political points instead of working to win Oregon elections.

"It's none of our business what

US House Representatives from other states do" Rep. Bill Post, R-Keizer, wrote in a blog post demanding an agenda reset. "Focus, please."

The Senate did not make a group statement, but some also were angry with the timing, topic and tone of the attack.

"I have not seen any credible evidence to suggest that the riot at the United States Capitol was a 'false flag,'" said Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend. "I do not support the Oregon Republican Party's resolution. I find it disheartening that while Oregonians are struggling, these political distractions get in the way of helping them recover."

Findley, R-Vale, released a separate statement Jan. 27 that said he does not support the state party's resolution, which he described as "an unfortunate distraction."

"I can't say that it was, I can't say that it was not (a false flag operation)," Findley told the Eagle. "What I can say is the more time I try to figure out and sort that out, is less time I've been able to spend on getting Oregon back to work, protecting businesses and getting vaccines in everybody's arm."

The uproar intensified when the Anti-Defamation League harshly criticized Republicans for misappropriating the Reichstag fire, a prelude to the Holocaust, to buttress an argument that those who were the target of the attacks were the perpetrators.

"The violence at the US Capitol on January 6th was a large-scale physical assault on our nation's dem-

ocratic values and institutions perpetrated by right-wing conspiracy theorists, extremists, and supporters of former President Trump. That is a fact," the ADL said in a statement.

The Republican lawmakers said they were blindsided by the Oregon Republican Party pronouncement. They were never consulted or even told in advance what was coming from the party's 22-member executive committee of GOP activists.

The Oregon State Committee has provided fuel for a feud with GOP

issues rather than trying to decide whether some given candidate meets some litmus test," he said. "The party doesn't pick the candidates, the voters do."

Critics within the party say the hard right turn on the current version of the Republican Party would reject Oregon icons like Gov. Tom McCall and Sen Mark Hatfield, who spearheaded environmental reforms and equal rights issues.

No Republican has won the governorship since Vic Atiyeh in 1982.

on launching recall efforts against Gov. Kate Brown that never got enough signatures to even trigger a vote.

Julie Parrish, a former GOP House member who is now a political consultant, said in 2019 that a recall was a sign of a party leadership low on good ideas.

"We need a strategy, and a recall isn't it," she said.

The ultimate fallout on the controversy won't be known for a while. Voters don't go to the polls again for major partisan offices until the May 2022 primaries.

Jim Moore, a professor at Pacific University, studies public reactions to politics as outreach director from a base named after one of those long-ago Republicans: The Tom McCall Center for Civic Engagement.

"The biggest impact of the 'false flag' assertion will be it driving more moderate Republicans out of the party — those that are still left after five years of Trump and decades of a party moving to the right on all issues," he said.

Winning elections is tough for Republicans in Oregon today. But the party's scant presence in Salem and Washington was given a jolt by the claims.

"That all being said, the Oregon Republican Party is getting international notice with its incendiary public pronouncements," Moore said. "The measure of how that is working out will be simple — does it bring in money to the ORP coffers?"

The Blue Mountain Eagle contributed to this report.

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lawmakers before. The party hosted conservative political firebrand Roger Stone at its 2018 conference in Salem. A squad of Proud Boys, the right-wing group with a reputation for violence, served as Stone's bodyguards, flashing "white power" hand signs at a party after his speech.

Despite the sharply conservative tone of the statement, state GOP chairman Bill Currier has been criticized by some activists as not being conservative enough by requiring a litmus test on issues important to the party's increasingly Trump-oriented base.

Currier said he believes the party needed to be a "big tent" that can create winning coalitions with unaffiliated voters and disenchanted Democrats.

"We need to be more focused on

The state has supported the Democratic candidate for President, win or lose, back to Mike Dukakis in 1988.

The governor, both senators, and four of five members of Congress are Democrats. So are all the state executive offices: attorney general, treasurer, secretary of state and labor commissioner. The Democrats have 37-23 majority in the House and 18-12 in the Senate.

Republican lawmakers running in 2020 found themselves sharing a ballot and sometimes a stage with Jo Rae Perkins, a QAnon conspiracy believer, who was easily defeated by Democrat Sen. Jeff Merkley. Without strong statewide candidates, Currier and the party committee have been called out by some in the GOP for a "fixation"

COVID

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Lindsay said the state lab reporting system had many issues the first week of January, and lab information was lost. The county hoped the labs would eventually show up with the correct reporting date but had to manually enter all of the cases Jan. 14 after there was no resolution, she said.

According to correspondence sent with the letter to Owens, Jessica Winegar, the health department's clinic manager, emailed an OHA staff member on Jan. 12 saying over 20 cases from Grant County had not been reported by the state.

After confirming those cases were not new, the OHA staffer said, "I'll communicate to our leadership here that these cases did not all have onset yesterday and the issue was delayed laboratory reporting."

Lindsay said she has since met with OHA officials, challenging the decision to move the county into moderate risk. After that was unsuccessful, she and the county court members sent the letter to Owens.

"This has a significant negative impact upon our residents and businesses," the letter said. "...Please reconsider this decision."

Owens' Chief of Staff



Pat Allen, Oregon Health Authority director, at a press conference in 2020.

Andrea Dominguez attached the county letter to an email sent to OHA Director Patrick Allen and a member of the governor's staff Thursday morning.

"It is our understanding that Grant County was put into the 'medium risk' cat-

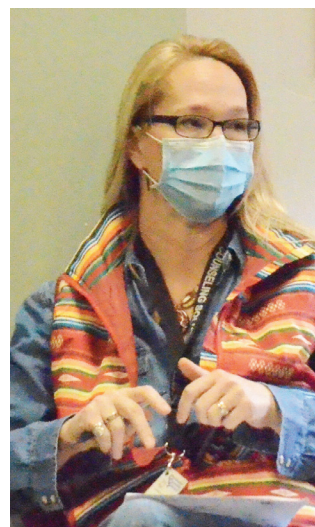
egory," Dominguez wrote. "Rep. Owens would appreciate knowing if this was accidental, as the numbers do not seem to support that categorization? If not he would appreciate knowing what information was used in the decision to

move Grant County to the 'medium risk' category."

OHA Public Information Officer Tim Heider said Friday afternoon, however, that it doesn't matter when the positive tests occurred, only when the "cases" that are reported to the state are

created.

"(Grant County) public health became aware of and entered several cases during that period that tested prior to the two week period, so they would like them taken out of the calculation," he said. "We had



Eagle file photo
Kimberly Lindsay, Grant County public health administrator, during a session of Grant County Court in November.



Eagle file photo
State Rep. Mark Owens

several discussions with local public health that the data is based on when the cases are created; we have not manually examined any county's data to determine date of onset or testing as that is not the basis of the metric."

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He said Grant County's current caseload number is 47, though it fluctuates weekly. During his tenure as director of Community Corrections, he saw it get as high as 64.

According to the 2020-2021 budget, Grant County's Community Corrections Fund received about \$285,000 in

state "grant-in-aid" in 2017-2018 and 2018-2019. For 2019-2020, \$250,000 was budgeted, and in 2020-2021, \$240,000 was budgeted. Fur-

ther reductions in workload could reduce these payments.

McKinley said there have been rumblings statewide to combine multiple probation

offices, either by putting them under the Department of Corrections or by regionalizing them.

He said knowing that is

a possible option gives the county time to wait and see how things play out and make a better decision.

McKinley said, while the

case count number will likely decrease, it is crucial to emphasize that there are still many unknowns at this point.

"Do I see the numbers going lower? I sure do," he said. "That's what I'm trying to prepare for because we just don't know so it's like one of those things where we have a chance at the moment to sit back and look at it, save a few dollars and save the county some money."

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—Todd McKinley, Grant County sheriff and Community Corrections director

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