

Government transparency is in our hands

Oregon lawmakers made a good move toward greater transparency in government when they passed two bills connected to higher education.

House Bill 2542, which requires public universities and colleges to prominently display the fees they charge students, and House Bill 2919, which stipulates higher education facilities clearly display the costs of course materials when students register for class, secured passage.

On the face, both bills may not seem altogether earth shattering, but they are important when placed in the context of transparency in government.

Transparency in government is a crucial pillar of a democracy. Sadly, over the past few decades that notion — and goal — of transparency has gradually been eroded.

That is not good for our form of government. When government agencies that are funded through public dollars step away from transparency, everyone loses. Yet, it occurs more often than the average person probably knows.

When government disregards transparency — or worse, acts like it is being transparent when it is not — it means it is no longer accountable to the people.

Millions in public funds are funneled into various state agencies every year in Oregon. That money is not the government's, it's yours. That means the people who work in government are accountable to you, the voter.

Oregon is lucky in a sense because of its public records laws, which provide a gateway into government when it refuses to hold itself accountable to the people. The public records laws are robust — to a point — but are constantly under siege by those who wish to restrict oversight.

Independent organizations, such as newspapers, are also an important tool to hold government accountable. Often, newspapers use public records laws to dig out information government agencies and officials do not want the public to see.

In a democracy, there should not be any type of restrictions — barring top secret military projects or personal health records — that hamper a voter's access to information.

While newspapers and news organizations fill a crucial role in ensuring greater transparency, in the end the voter must play a key role as well.

That means paying attention to what is going on in places such as the Oregon Legislature and asking good, thoughtful questions of lawmakers.

There never has been anything wrong about asking questions in democracy.

Government tends to block access to information, and sometimes appointed or elected officials will decide they know better than the voter about what information should be released.

They do not.



GUEST COMMENT

Differing opinions

In response to Robin Roberts' comment May 26, first of all, I would like to thank you for your service to our country as you stated that you are a veteran.

It is quite apparent that you and I have differing opinions on the current state of affairs. I am terribly sorry that you did not attend our community town hall meeting. We made an attempt to notify every citizen of Grant County. We sent out postcards addressed to local postal customers that were hand delivered to each post office in Grant County with instructions that they were to go in every community in Grant County. It was also announced by Logan Baggett on KJFY as a public announcement.

I attended a Grant County commissioners meeting on April 28, and our Grant County Judge Scott Myers informed everyone present that if

we didn't go along with the state and federal mandates that the county would lose funding for roads, hospitals and schools. That is called extortion. This meeting was streamed live on Blue Mountain Eagle's Facebook page, and you can still listen to it there. In separate conversations with our education district personnel, who will remain nameless out of respect to their jobs, they stated the exact same thing. I spoke with administration at the hospital, trying to get someone to come to our town hall meeting to speak. I also spoke with county health services, and none would come and speak.

The media and most of our governments, worldwide, are creating a fear factor, for whatever reasons, that is totally ridiculous. I also stated in the Coffee Time interview that through a link to the National Highway Safety Institute, it shows

that your, mine or anyone's chance of dying in a car accident is 1 in 103. Are you going to stop driving your car and walk to town for your groceries? The true data is being tamped down by all of the major mainstream media sources, and any voice of opposition is being silenced in any way possible. The very freedoms and liberties that you served our country to protect are being taken away from us every day, right under your nose. What freedoms are you going to be willing to give up next? All that I am saying is, if you want to wear a mask and get vaccinated, that is your choice to make, but it is not the American way to demand that everyone do so. I personally feel that there is a larger agenda behind all of this. It is a shame, but the truth is, you are going to have to look a little harder if you want the true facts.

Bill Newman resides in Monument.

GUEST COMMENT

Never forget fallen heroes

For the second year in a row, Memorial Day observances in communities, organizations and even within family groups looked very different because of the COVID pandemic.

The parades, large ceremonies and other occasions, which I and so many others in the Oregon veteran community have always found moving and meaningful, have not yet been able to safely return in many places.

Yet, the importance of this day — and the emotions and memories that it brings — have not changed.

For countless families across our communities, our state and our nation, Memorial Day is a stark, and often painful, reminder of those loved ones who went to serve their country and never came home.

Whether they volunteered during a time of war, stood guard over our peace or never expected to wear the uniform until their draft card arrived — their service and selfless sacrifice represent the best and highest ideals that America has to offer.

We continue to feel their loss today.

In recent months, and particularly as we have approached this year's Memorial Day holiday, I have found myself reflecting on the themes of unity and strength in diversity.

It was just before the Korean War, in 1948, that President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981 — abolishing discrimination based on race, color, religion or national origin in the United States Armed Forces. When war broke out in 1950, our country entered the fray with a fully integrated and desegregated military.

I believe those who have served our nation in uniform know the meaning — and the value — of unity more than almost anyone else. We were trained to protect those on our right and those on our left — and to trust that they would do the same for us.

Every day in service, all that mattered was that someone had your six, and was there to offer a hand when you stumbled. Their color, nation of origin, religion or sexual orientation were not part of the equation.

After service, the diversity of our veteran community is a source of immense pride and strength. We are Black, White, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander, men, women,

transgender and non-binary, young and old, urban and rural, of every race, religion and creed — unified through our shared service and sacrifice.

The honored ranks of the fallen include Sgt. John Noble Holcomb, who was born in Baker City. John was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously for his extraordinary courage and sacrifice during the Vietnam War — where he singlehandedly forced an enemy retreat, despite being mortally wounded, saving many American lives.

They include Erin McLyman, from Eugene, who proudly enlisted in the United States Air Force after recovering from a severe, years-long addiction to drugs and alcohol that began when she was in just her first year in high school. She later enlisted in the Oregon National Guard, and was eager to deploy to Iraq. She died March 13, 2010, in an enemy mortar attack.

They include the 100th Infantry Battalion — which became known unofficially as the "Purple Heart Battalion." The unit was one of only two combat units during World War II that was comprised of second-generation Japanese-Americans (known as "Nisei") who had briefly had their rifles stripped away due to prejudice following the attack on Pearl Harbor.

They would go on to fight bravely in Europe, even as their families remained in internment camps back in the United States. The men of the 100th Infantry Battalion earned recognition as the most decorated American unit of its size and length of service. The 18,000 men who served earned nearly 9,500 Purple Hearts, 21 Medals of Honor and an unprecedented seven Presidential Unit Citations.

And the honored ranks of the fallen include Army Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe, who was the first Black service member to receive the Medal of Honor for service in Iraq or Afghanistan for the heroism he displayed after his Bradley struck a roadside bomb.

The explosion ruptured the Bradley's fuel cell, engulfing both the vehicle and its occupants in flames. Enemy fire soon rained down on their posi-

tion. But none of that stopped Sgt. Cashe from acting quickly to save his soldiers.

Drenched in fuel, he pulled the driver and five other soldiers from the burning vehicle — saving their lives, while suffering second- and third-degree burns over 72% of his own body. Despite this, he insisted on being the last person on a medical evacuation helicopter.

Alwyn exhibited incredible courage during that attack. Despite the fact that both the vehicle and its occupants were engulfed in flames, and amid unrelenting enemy fire, Sgt. Cashe acted quickly to save his soldiers.

Sgt. Cashe died 22 days later — on Nov. 8, 2005. He was only 35.

It is impossible to know exactly what was going through the minds of Sgt. Cashe, Sgt. Holcomb, Pvt. McLyman, the members of the 100th Infantry Battalion and so many other heroes as they made the ultimate sacrifice. But we who have served know they were motivated by the rare courage and devotion that is common to those who have borne the battle — to protect our nation, our loved ones back home and our fellow servicemembers.

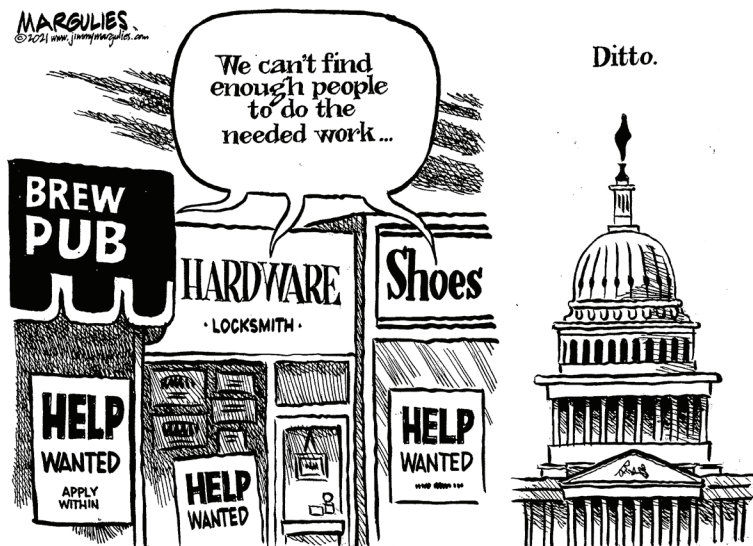
The harsh reality of war and conflict is that not everyone will make it home. Let us honor the memory of heroes no longer with us — not just on Memorial Day, but every day. And let us strive to live up to the incredible example they have set for all of us.

May we never forget our fallen heroes. They were the best our country had to offer, and their memory inspires us to be better. Their courage moves us. The world is a better place because of them, because they lived and because they served.

May we never forget what they sacrificed, and what their loved ones have lost.

On behalf of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs, I wish you and your loved ones a safe, reverent and meaningful Memorial Day.

Kelly Fitzpatrick is the director of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs and Gov. Kate Brown's policy advisor on veterans' issues. She is a retired Army officer. Her military awards and decorations include multiple awards of the Meritorious Service Medal, the Southwest Asia Service Medal and the Army Parachutist Badge.



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