

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

Integrity may not serve people well

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines integrity as "moral soundness, honesty, uprightness." But neither Webster nor any other lexicographer could have foreseen how that seemingly forthright word would be used in the world of politics.

As former Senator John Ashcroft of Missouri goes through mostly predictable confirmation hearings, as the incoming president's attorney general designee, every other phrase seems to pivot on "integrity."

Ashcroft's long history of anti-abortion (even in cases of rape or incest), anti-birth control, anti-gun control, anti-affirmative action is neither questioned nor argued. That history is merely cited. Some consider it reason to appoint him and others consider it reason to oppose the appointment. But no one argues that Ashcroft lacks integrity. They simply wonder how it would affect his performance as the nation's top law enforcement officer.

Ashcroft and his supporters say his personal integrity would require him to enforce all laws, including those that he has tried to overturn. His opponents say that his personal integrity wouldn't allow him to fully support laws that he has tried to overturn because he finds them morally repugnant.

It is puzzling.

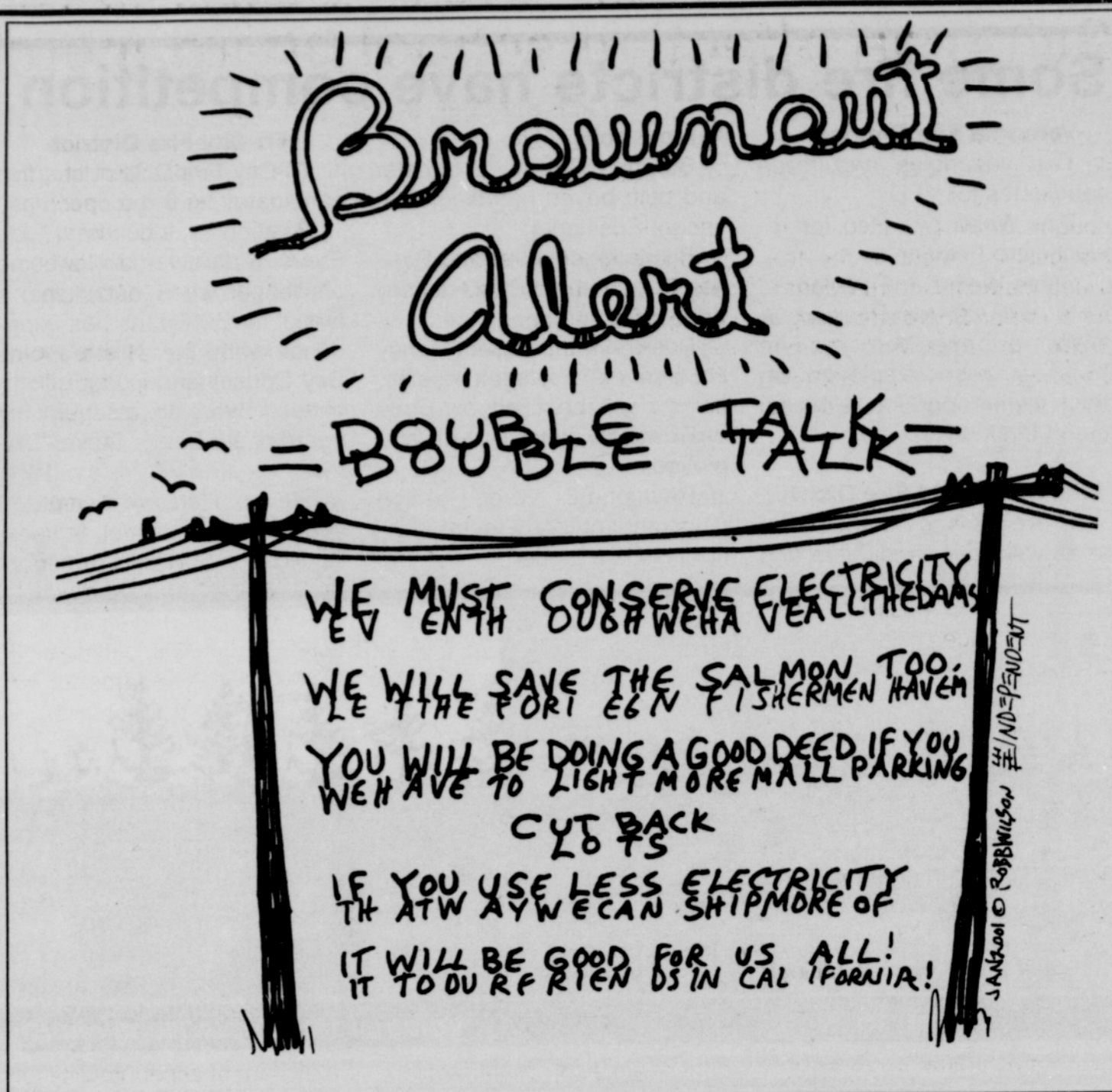
We have a closer look at senatorial integrity and politics, right here in Oregon. Senator Gordon Smith, whose honesty and moral uprightness (integrity) are often favorably cited, refuses to support his constituency because of his integrity. Smith personally opposes Oregon's assisted suicide law, so his integrity will not let him help Senator Ron Wyden fend off the efforts of an Oklahoma senator to cripple the Oregon law by changing federal regulations.

What makes this situation more interesting is that Wyden also personally opposes the law. In his case, however, his integrity requires him to support the will of his constituents, the Oregonians who twice voted to institute the assisted suicide law.

If integrity is a two-edged sword in Oregon, it must be a circular saw in Washington, D.C.

New book plotted around process of confirmation

By happenstance, there is a new book out by Richard North Patterson called *Protect and Defend*, in which the plot revolves around the confirmation of a Supreme Court nominee. It's a well-written, don't-want-to-put-it-down book, but it is also a thoughtful look at how personal and divisive the whole confirmation process has become. *Protect and Defend* is available at the Vernonia Public Library.



Wyden town hall meeting well attended

A standing-room-only crowd filling the Scout Cabin in Vernonia on Jan. 7, paused uncomfortably when Senator Ron Wyden opened his Columbia County town hall meeting by saying his speech would be about two hours long — then he laughed and confirmed that there would be no speech. After a brief address, Wyden took questions from the audience and, in seemingly no time at all, the two hours had passed.

Power rates and the deregulation of power, especially electricity, generated considerable discussion. A suggestion that the U.S. start buying natural gas from the Gulf of Mexico triggered Wyden's frustration with supply manipulations by BP that he feels increased gasoline prices on the West Coast. As documents obtained by *The Oregonian* revealed, BP reduced the supply of Alaskan crude oil to West Coast refineries by selling it to Asian markets for less than the domestic price. This shortage, Wyden says, caused the hike in West Coast gas prices. He is seeking federal legislation that would prohibit selling domestic gas and oil to foreign markets.

The most emotionally charged discussion concerned the nomination of former Senator John Ashcroft for U.S. Attorney General. Several speakers passionately expressed doubts about Ashcroft's willingness to uphold a federal law that protects patients and personnel at abortion clinics, with two of them citing Ashcroft's promotion of a constitutional amendment that would ban all abortions, including those caused by rape or incest.

"If anybody doubted that elections have consequences, they should understand by the end of this nomination process," Wyden responded.

Ashcroft would not get automatic approval from his former colleagues in the Senate, Wyden said, because of his repeated efforts to reverse abortion safeguards and eliminate all gun control laws.

"This is not a far right country that wants to throw out women's right to choose," Wyden explained, adding that a majority of Americans support the Brady Bill on hand-gun control and do not approve of either fully automatic assault rifles or armor-piercing "Cop killer" ammunition.

Although one member of the audience pressed him on the right to bear arms, including handguns, Wyden politely, but firmly refused to reverse his position in support of handgun regulation.

Social Security payments and potential Social Security deficits also attracted questions. Wyden said that the Social Security surplus should be "Off limits" to all other parts of gov-



A tieless Senator Ron Wyden answered questions without pause for about two hours at his town hall meeting in Vernonia.

ernment and that he would like to see the budget surplus used first to pay back the funds "borrowed" from Social Security. Continuing on the subject of the federal budget, Wyden noted that the budget surplus of the last three years is the first since the great depression.

"In a small community like this," Wyden said of the turnout, "to have a standing-room-only crowd and intelligent questions, demonstrates your knowledge of government. This is what the founding fathers envisioned as democracy."

Sen. Wyden holds a town hall meeting in every county of Oregon, every year. Previous Columbia County meetings have been in St. Helens or Scappoose.