

Oregon's fatal case of the Pulitzer pox

Michael Davis 9:15 p.m. PST February 14, 2015



(Photo: AP)

You think the Disneyland measles outbreak was dangerous?

How about the virulent strain of Pulitzer pox that overtook the five-member editorial board at our state's largest news organization?

What's Pulitzer pox, you ask? It's a swelling of the cranium following the awarding of journalism's top prize. When you are overcome by it, Pulitzer pox creates an insatiable craving for more awards.

To the trained eye, Pulitzer pox symptoms are easy to spot. The early stages produce ecstasy, euphoria and a thirst for champagne.

But in the weeks that follow, all the accolades make the swelling worse, compromising judgment and, in unfortunate cases, delusions of grandeur, high fever and delirium.

The Oregonian (<http://topics.oregonlive.com/tag/pers-pulitzer/index-oldest.html>) won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 2014 (<http://www.pulitzer.org/citation/2014-Editorial-Writing>). Apparently, they developed no immunity and it went right to their heads.

How else to explain the power-mad editorial suggestion on Feb. 4 (http://www.oregonlive.com/opinion/index.ssf/2015/02/john_kitzhaber_must_resign_edi.html) that the duly elected governor of Oregon accede to their demand and resign?

At the time, Kitzhaber, a popular and trusted public servant who has moved this state forward in innumerable ways, had not been charged with any crime or found by anyone in authority to have crossed any ethical breach.

Nothing about that has changed, yet, after a complete cave-in by the governor's supporters and a media frenzy of O.J. proportions, John Kitzhaber is out of the job he was elected to fulfill.

Both the Oregonian and Willamette Week did some fine investigative reporting on their news pages. My beef is not with the news coverage, although some media outlets did spin out of control in the final days. My beef is with the pomposity of opinionizing — the insidious torpedoing of a good man who may have made some errors of judgment.

It may well be that Kitzhaber and Hayes were ensnared in influence peddling and a misuse of power. Maybe federal and state investigators will discover they were scoundrels of the first order, bought-and-paid-for swindlers who stuffed their pockets with clean-energy cash.

But there was no need to evict them from government before due process had been followed and completed.

Even Rod Blagojevich, the oily former Illinois governor who tried to hustle a U.S. Senate seat, was given due process.

Didn't John Kitzhaber and Cylvia Hayes deserve as much?

The media distraction

In that Feb. 4 editorial (http://www.oregonlive.com/opinion/index.ssf/2015/02/john_kitzhaber_must_resign_edi.html), the Oregonian suggested that Kitzhaber's troubles had become such a distraction that nothing was getting done in Salem, that government was at a standstill.

That we here at the Statesman Journal recognized that as, ahem, an exaggeration (and I'm being polite here) may have had something to do with our building being within walking distance of the Capitol. We walked over and checked, and everything was fine.

The only distraction was the Oregonian editorial.

The Oregonian editorial board took a page out of the Karl Rove/Roger Ailes playbook – Obama may have been born in Kenya — by promoting an assumption as if it were fact, hoping others would pick up the drumbeat.

Sadly, that's exactly what happened.

John Kitzhaber did not deserve to be railroaded out of office by a quintet of editorialists who clearly were out to get him. It seemed almost personal, as if the governor had once said something bad about their mamas.

I look back to the morning after the election. Instead of writing a gracious congratulatory editorial on Kitzhaber's winning an unprecedented fourth term, the Oregonian editorial board effectively kneed him in the groin.

Here's a sample on that editorial, which reeked with arrogance and pique:

"Let's hope Kitzhaber, known for his ambition and big ideas, discovers a little humility. Surely, even he must recognize that Oregonians didn't give him a mandate Tuesday. What they gave him is an opportunity to restore some of the credibility he's squandered."

And then there was this: "As agendas go, proving that you can be trusted is modest, indeed, especially for a big-idea guy like Kitzhaber. But when a governor has done so much to erode his own credibility as Kitzhaber has, that's what redemption demands. So, break out the brooms, the bleach and the Windex and get to work."

It was if the editorial board had woken up to the sound of dream-sequence harp music used on sitcoms, imagining themselves scolding the winner and warning him that if he didn't shape up — and soon — there would be hell to pay.

That hell came on Feb. 4, in the thou-shalt-resign editorial that all but thundered, "Gird yourself in sackcloth and ashes, Kitzhaber, and never shall ye set forth in this land again."

That's Pulitzer pox.

It can lead to a God complex.

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Feb. 14, 2015, 9:11 p.m.



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