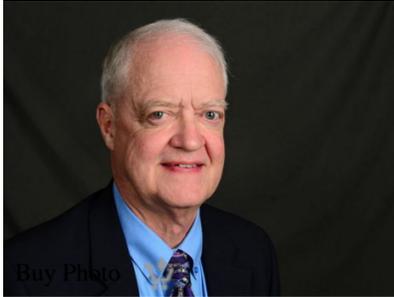


The politics of fear, Republican style



Dick Hughes, Statesman Journal 9:19 p.m. PDT October 18, 2014



(Photo: DANIELLE PETERSON / Statesman Journal)

Let us consider the Politics of Fear.

Today's exhibits come courtesy of the Oregon Senate Republicans. Democratic campaigns have been equally smarmy, but the Senate Republicans deserve special mention. We'll get to the good in a moment.

First, the bad. An attack mailer.

One side is adorned with images of memorial candles and lists 12 Oregonians who were killed in recent years, primarily in traffic crashes, by illegal aliens. The other side of the flier blames state Senate President Peter Courtney, a Salem Democrat: "What part of 'illegal' doesn't Peter Courtney understand?"

Beneath that red text, the flier states: "Peter Courtney gave those living illegally in our state a special Oregon drivers' license.

"The rest of us have to show a birth certificate and other legal documents to prove our residency and citizenship. Put under Peter Courtney's law, **illegals can get a valid Oregon drivers license by simply showing a utility bill!**"

The piece then urges a vote for Courtney's opponent in Senate District 11, Patti Milne.

Let's start at the top. There is no such thing as an "illegal." There is no law against being a human. A person might be in the country illegally, but that does not make the person illegal.

The piece might as well be shouting, "The illegals are coming! The illegals are coming!"

Campaigns thrive on fear-created-by-deception, using it to rake in donations as well as votes. "The abortionists are coming!" "The abortion-clinic closers are coming!" "The gays are coming!" "The homophobes are coming."

As someone who lived through the Civil Rights Movement — when even Northwest towns still banned blacks from certain neighborhoods — such capitalizing on irrational fear is reminiscent of "The (insert ugly term for African Americans here) are coming!"

Consider

- The bill offering driver cards to undocumented Oregonians passed on a bipartisan basis.
- No one has received such a driver card. That is what Measure 88 is about.
- A person would have to show more than a utility bill to get a driver card.
- Aren't most fatal crashes and homicides in Oregon committed by U.S. citizens and other legalized residents? Oddly, I don't see anyone shouting, "The legals are coming! The legals are coming!"

Or, as I would prefer, "Oregonians."

The scary part is that the flier contains enough of a smidgin of truth that it will bring in votes and dollars. Courtney did support setting up a DMV process to provide driver cards for Oregonians who can show proof of residency but not of legal status. Presumably, most of driver card recipients would be in the U.S. illegally.

As someone who has traveled throughout North America and in Europe and Asia, I must emphasize that U.S. driving laws are different than many countries'. I will feel safer if someone from another country passes Oregon driving tests before getting on the road, even if he is here illegally.

As for Courtney, or Measure 88, there is nothing wrong with distributing materials that oppose them but stay honest.

But truth, like pragmatism, gets lost in politics.

As Republican Rep. Jim Thompson told me last week, "We're losing civility in politics. Statesmanship is gone. Civility is going."

Thompson speaks from experience. He lost the Republican primary this year after 31 negative mailers were issued against him.

The Republican party's penchant for self-destruction is why Democrats hold all the statewide elected offices. And at least in Polk County, where Thompson lives, the party seems bent on continuing its self-destructive ways.

Which brings me to the good news. Last week, the Oregon Senate Republican leader took an unprecedented action. [Sen. Ted Ferrioli repudiated](/story/news/politics/elections/2014/10/17/oregon-republican-slams-national-gop-negative-mailer/17459595/) a national Republican group's negative mailer against Courtney, as well as campaign statements made by one of his fellow Republican senators.

As part of 2013's special session, legislative leaders had agreed that lawmakers would not face campaign attacks for changing the state's senior medical deduction. It was a brilliant way to create a political breakthrough, so the danger of campaign damage would not deter legislators from supporting the necessary change.

Good for legislators in 2013. Good for Ferrioli.

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