

EDITORIAL

Stuck in Time

In 1986, historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote “The Cycles of American History,” in which he built on ideas originally developed by his father that American politics turns over every generation or so. Oregon, this wonderful provincial place we call home, likes to believe it is immune, protected, from a great part of the American experience. It’s a nice thought for some, but odds are that even Oregon politics turns over every generation. Or so we hope.

If you stay here long enough, you’ll come to realize that Oregon is affected by cycles. In recent eras, there have been decades when Oregon wanted to be part of the world and decades when Oregon wanted to opt out. A closer look at the pendulum swing in the cultural and economic life of Oregon shows that trends toward opting in or out of the world may not be just haphazard events. Pressure builds up too far in one direction and the whole system flips over. Why Oregon, unlike its neighbors Washington and California, insists on constantly changing its attitude toward being part of the world remains a mystery. But in the coming years, globalization may not be so kind to the state’s whimsical nature.

A snapshot of the state’s capriciousness: Post World War II, Oregon boomed like the rest of the nation as population in the state doubled from one to two million between 1940 and 1970. The “Oregon Blue Book” describes a growth fueled by postwar timber harvests: “For decades, Coos Bay held the title as the world’s largest lumber shipping port.”

In “RFK and His Times,” Schlesinger describes how Oregon looked to him in 1968. “Oregon is a pleasant, homogenous, self-contained state filled with pleasant, homogenous, self-contained people, overwhelmingly white, Protestant and middle class. Even the working class is middle class, with boats on the lakes and cabins in the mountains.” *Time* would later attribute Schlesinger’s especially snide attitude to Oregon’s 1968 Primary, when RFK was the first Kennedy to lose an election.

Politics aside, Schlesinger’s description of self-contained people may be a hint of the direction Tom McCall took Oregon in his two terms as governor from 1967-75. Reacting to the state’s growing environmental pressures, McCall passed America’s most restrictive land use laws. But even that wasn’t good enough for McCall; he told newcomers, “Visit, but don’t stay.” Under McCall, Oregon opted out of the world.

Then in the early 1980s, Oregon suffered its worst recession as unemployment grew to 12.7 percent — the highest unemployment rate in any region of the country since the Great Depression. Gov. Vic Atiyeh decided it was time for Oregon to opt back into the world.

In “Fire at Eden’s Gate: Tom McCall and the Oregon Story,” author Brent Walth describes the sentiment Atiyeh was riding when he worked to reverse the state’s direction:

Cheery economic times in the 1960s and 1970s had allowed McCall to experiment with Oregon’s future. But in 1982, with Oregon in dire economic straits, McCall faced history’s fickle judgment. Once eager to praise McCall, the press now turned on him. Oregonians who had considered McCall a modern folk hero only a few years before now eyed him warily. The whispering started: Wasn’t he the one who made new industry unwelcome in Oregon with nitpicking environmental laws? Wasn’t he the one who said, “Visit, but don’t stay”? Wasn’t he the one who had ruined this state?

In an effort to give Oregon a new image, Atiyeh held a media event at the California border to tape over the words “Visit, but don’t stay.” McCall attended the event and Atiyeh introduced him saying, “Governor McCall will now be the speaker at the funeral of his own prose.”

Atiyeh opened Oregon to the world, and the state boomed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Neil Goldschmidt built on his work. In 1999, Atiyeh wrote in *BNW* how he reopened the state to international commerce. “After eight years as governor and nine trips to Asia, a climate was created where more than 100 Asian companies built plants and factories in Oregon. By the time I left office in 1987, Intel informed me that they would do their expansion in Oregon.”

By the mid 1990s, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that in Washington County, the heart of the Silicon Forest, billions were invested in the semiconductor industry, largely driven by Intel. The paper reported that more money was invested in one county in that industry than in all the rest of the country put together. These were boom times, and Oregon was very much part of the world economy. With imagination Oregonians could picture major league baseball in a modern ballpark on the banks of the Willamette River, or a high-speed train traveling from Portland to Seattle in less than an hour, or a top 25 engineering school rising from Intel’s high-tech synergy. Portland Mayor Bud Clark would hang another sign on I-5, only this sign would boast about the number of people who moved to Oregon that year. Oregon was very much in play.

But just as Intel was investing so heavily in Oregon, the pendulum was swinging; the state’s leadership was changing. In 1994, Vera Katz replaced Bud Clark as mayor. Successive weak governors John Kitzhaber and Ted Kulongoski bowed to the direction Katz set for the state, once again leaving the world stage. In a 2002 interview, *BNW* asked then-candidate Kulongoski if as governor he would “lecture the mayor of Portland about jobs?” Kulongoski replied, “I don’t think that I have to lecture Vera about anything. I know her very well, and it will probably be the other way around.”

Result: Oregon opted out in the mid-1990s, apparently afraid of too much success. A second result: By the summer of 2001, Oregon would once again lead the nation in unemployment, as the rate climbed higher than 8 percent.

Now, as an international and national recession looms, Oregon finds itself poorly equipped for hard times. The unemployment rate is still well above the national average and per capita income has slipped (Oregon now ranks 28 nationally), as low-wage service jobs have replaced higher-paying manufacturing jobs. The anti-growth cycle that began with the election of Katz is now well into its second decade. Is it time for the pendulum to swing back? Are Oregonians now as fearful of failure as they were fearful of too much world success in the mid-1990s?

Since Jim Francesconi's failed bid to be mayor of Portland in 2004, few city leaders contemplating a run for office want to be associated with a pro-growth, pro-business position. Makes sense — this is, after all, a “Dennis Kucinich” type of place (“Keep Portland weird” and all that). We respect that distance; they want to win. However, one paragraph in Sho Dozono's recent *Oregonian* op-ed piece clangs with the rest of his attempts to out-liberal and out-politically correct Sam Adams. One paragraph stands out as a real lemon in weird Portland, Ore.:

My race will be about the health of our economy. Well-paying jobs allow us to keep our life style satisfying. But more than that, our businesses must be competitive in the fast-moving global economy. We need to be reaching outside of our comfort zone by seeking new markets, building long-lasting relationships that will ensure new jobs in the future. We need bold leadership that can steer us to new opportunities.

Sounds like Vic Atiyeh, doesn't it? Is Dozono signaling the pendulum is beginning its long swing back? Or is that lone paragraph an unintended anachronism? After all, there are a lot of voters and a lot of powerful people committed to Oregon as a failing state and Portland as a “sad sack city.”

What are the risks to the economic health and balance of Oregon if the pendulum sticks just when the hour has arrived for it to swing back?