

Oregon's Governor Deserved Better

Last Friday, after a week of intense scrutiny and speculation, the Democratic Governor of Oregon, John Kitzhaber announced his resignation over his alleged conflict of interest with his fiancée's use of her government connections to further her private business. The University of Oregon's [Priscilla Southwell](#) argues that commentators have failed to understand just how close-knit Oregon's political and policy communities are. She writes that given Governor Kitzhaber's 37 years of state service, he deserved the due process of the law and not a media trial and 'execution'.



Until recently, I used to think that I lived in the almost perfect state. Oregon has progressive environmental laws, innovative health care, same-sex marriage, unrestricted beach access, vote-by mail – all facilitated by courageous political leaders from both political parties – Tom McCall, Wayne Morse, Mark Hatfield, AND John Kitzhaber.

Yet, Democratic Governor John Kitzhaber announced last week that he will resign today, although he has never been formally charged with any offense, and he maintains his innocence. Called “defiant” in his exit by the *Portland Oregonian*, his words speak volumes about how difficult it is to be a political leader these days:

“I must also say that it is deeply troubling to me to realize that we have come to a place in the history of this great state of ours where a person can be charged, tried, convicted and sentenced by the media with no due process and no independent verification of the allegations involved. But even more troubling — and on a very personal level as someone who has given 35 years of public service to Oregon — is that so many of my former allies in common cause have been willing to simply accept this judgment at its face value.”

With regard to Kitzhaber's charge against the media – everyone living in the post-Watergate years knows that investigative political reporting is essential. Yet, the treatment of Kitzhaber and his fiancée, Cylvia Hayes, came close to being “yellow journalism.” It would be as if Bernstein and Woodward had spent all their time looking into what Pat Nixon did before she got married to the President! Last fall, I was mystified as to why any political reporter would consider the previous marriages of a candidate's fiancée relevant to the contest between the gubernatorial candidates, but it did increase the “hits.”



Former Governor of Oregon, John Kitzhaber Credit: [Oregon Department of Transportation \(Flickr, CC-BY-2.0\)](#)

Of course, things got more serious when the investigation turned to alleged “conflict of interest,” and the role of the Governor’s fiancé in influencing environmental policy, and possibly gaining from it by getting fellowships from outside environmental groups. This appears to be a very naïve reaction to the inevitable overlap between spouse, partners, and friends in the political arena. John Kitzhaber and his fiancée met because they were both committed to environmental issues, and they continued to work together. In reality, most of the political, legal, and media leaders of the state of Oregon come from the same urban areas, and work and socialize with each other frequently, both in and out of politics. After all, the current Attorney General, who recently launched the investigation of Kitzhaber and his fiancée, is married to the publisher and co-owner of the *Willamette Week*, the newspaper that “broke” many of the stories about his fiancée. In the Department of Political Science at the University of Oregon, we encourage our students to find internships in law firms and political offices, in the hope they will be remembered when a job opens up a few years later. Perhaps this advice should be reconsidered in light of our current climate.

Of course, it is essential that the state’s Ethics Commission, and state’s Department of Justice, and even the FBI are looking into the matter. However, the notion of “innocence until proven guilty” never applied to the Governor and his fiancé, and he is now gone. What will everyone says if he is found innocent? Equally compelling, if the legal process had been able to run its natural course, and, instead, he was found guilty, the voters of Oregon, not the media, could have decided to remove him from office.

With regard to his former allies, they are equally culpable. I suspect that their own political ambitions were the prime reason that they abandoned the Governor. Many of them were resentful and envious when the 67-year-old governor decided to run for a fourth term in 2014. Of course, they, in unison, talked about what a “sad” day it was for Oregon last week. Yes, but also appalling, and depressing. Is there no state of grace for someone who has served the state for 37 years?

It is no small wonder why so few capable individuals chose to run for office.

Something has to change.

Disclaimer: *I have never worked on nor contributed to the campaigns of John Kitzhaber, and have only heard him give lectures on a few occasions. However, I did vote for him four times previously, along with millions of other Oregonians.*

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