

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

# THIS PRESIDENTS' DAY EVE, LAMENTING THE DEMISE OF DECORUM

Watching President Joe Biden deliver the State of the Union address a couple of weeks ago, I was struck but unsurprised by members of Congress shouting at him.

Virginia Republican Rep. Bob Good called Biden a “liar,” telling CNN the president deserved it for saying Republicans want cuts to Social Security and Medicare.

Georgia Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene used the same admonishment and others. She interrupted Biden several times, yelling, “China’s spying on us!” and later, “Secure the border!”

Tennessee Republican Rep. Andy Ogles shouted, “It’s your fault!” when Biden brought up fentanyl overdose deaths. He later claimed the president could solve the problem by closing the U.S. border with Mexico, linking overdose deaths to drug trafficking.

It’s not that Republicans have cornered the market when it comes to disrespecting the president. In 2020, former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat, dramatically ripped up President Donald Trump’s speech — for

all to see — at the conclusion of his State of the Union address.

For as long as I’ve watched the SOTU, it’s never been a kumbaya affair. Members of the president’s party give standing ovations throughout the speech; members of the opposition party sit on their hands, roll their eyes and sometimes grumble. Occasionally, they stand together — like last year, when Biden branded Vladimir Putin “a Russian dictator” and vowed to confiscate Russian oligarchs’ “ill-begotten” yachts.

But it seems to me we’ve crossed the line from dissent to disrespect. In terms of the American presidency, it’s a recent occurrence.

Fred Beuttler, a former deputy historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, told NPR the line was first breached in September 2009, when South Carolina Republican Rep. Joe Wilson yelled “You lie!” at President Barack Obama, in his address to a joint session of Congress. Obama had told the group that his health plan wouldn’t cover undocumented immigrants.

Beuttler said it was the first time a single, identifiable individual spoke out in disagreement, loudly enough for all to hear. Before the Wilson incident, dissension was more of a group activity: In 2004, for example, there was a chorus of boos from Democrats when President George W. Bush called for renewal of the Patriot Act in his State of the Union speech. In 2005, they shouted “No!” when Bush talked about Social Security reform.

Not so long ago, we expected a certain decorum from our leaders. Even in disagreement, they treated each other with respect. They listened to each other (or at least, pretended to).

Today’s barbs feel much more personal: Some believed that Wilson was motivated by racial animus toward Obama. Biden has been called old and feeble. Last summer, 54 House Republicans signed a letter calling for him to take a cognitive test. Trump took one on his own, to show he had the mental stamina to lead the country.

Decorum’s demise has trickled

down. We see it in open forums like city council and school board meetings. “You lie” may be one of the kinder accusations leveled today; too often, public officials have reported threats to their lives or property, made by the people they serve — and just for having a different point of view. No wonder public offices go unfilled across the country.

The same holds true in youth sports. Coaches — paid and volunteer — have had their fill of parents screaming, swearing and otherwise making a spectacle of themselves, unhappy that their child isn’t getting enough playing time (or feeling they’ve been otherwise mistreated). Some leagues are requiring parents to sign contracts agreeing not to meddle, but they do it anyway.

Last weekend, I heard an interview with Natasha Johnson, mayor of nearby Lake Elsinore, where abundant rainfall is expected to yield a super bloom of orange poppies this year. Johnson made an unpopular decision to close local access roads and canyon trails so the public can only view

the flowers online. (Locals supported the decision.)

Johnson explained that hundreds of thousands of people descended on Lake Elsinore in 2019, the year of the last super bloom. Lacking sufficient or suitable parking, the city provided shuttles to the poppy fields. Not everyone complied — and in the ensuing traffic mess, a California Highway Patrol officer lost his life. The mayor described the visitors’ behavior as unfortunate and disrespectful. The entire community was gridlocked. The poppies were trampled. The cost, Johnson said, was “way too steep for our residents and our wildlife.”

As decorum continues to wane, we find ourselves with fewer role models. But seeing what not to do — and who not to emulate — may be just as useful for guiding our lives. The examples are plentiful.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC’s programming, visit [ncronline.com](http://ncronline.com)

## DOGS

FROM B1 after hoop to get this started; everybody said these guys can’t do it, they might get violent and cause trauma to the dogs,” Stanton said. “But the animals have what we call a safety net crisis plan where we guarantee, in the event of a behavior, the dog immediately goes to his kennel or behind a locked door.”

That rule has only been used once so far across five dog fosterings, and it remains, Stanton said, a powerful governor of behavior.

“If somebody is upset and they’re starting to raise their voice, the others will say, ‘hey, you’re scaring the dog, bring it down, you can be mad, but go in your room and close the door, we’re not going to scare the dog,’” Stanton said.

That ability to limit outbursts has had very measurable results.

Of Merakey’s four group homes in San Diego County, the only one with a dog also has the lowest rates of property damage.

Dogs, the company has found, also serve as useful disruptors — their needs for walks, playtime and feeding breaking into the often-rigid schedules of those who live on the autism spectrum.

To eventually move to less-restrictive residences in the future, clients must learn to deal with disruption and interruption, and nothing snaps a comfortable routine like a dog who must be let out to do their business.

But it goes much deeper than that. Dogs and other animals provide the thing that every person needs at the core of their being: A purpose.

“The animals need them, they



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Adam Holwuttel takes Apollo for his daily walk in Escondido. “Apollo helps me a lot like when we go on walks, my attitude, my anger, my frustration, he comes up to me, gives me kisses,” he says.

need their love and affection, they need them to get a bath, they need them to go out on walks, they need them, and to feel needed and wanted is huge in this community,” Stanton said.

Agreeing to work with Merakey on the project was a leap of faith for Furballs Furever Rescue, which has only been up and running in Escondido for three years. Founder Katherine Chilidonia said that she had previous experience working in group homes for children and, talking with Stanton, could see how

residents could benefit.

So far, all four of the dogs that the group of men have fostered previous to Apollo have been adopted and not returned to the rescue.

Part of that success, she said, comes down to the dogs and the people being able to relate to each other. Both, after all, have struggled to fit into the footprint of society’s expectations.

“The guys, they know that the dogs they are fostering and that are put in their hands, that they’ve gone through things too, and I think

that’s kind of where they find that level ground,” Chilidonia said.

Merakey has been watching the program closely and plans to use it to add animals to other group homes it operates.

Elise Tretola, a senior vice president for the company, said that the San Diego Regional Center, which supports 4,000 residents with developmental disabilities in San Diego and Imperial counties, and the California Department of Developmental Services, have been willing to support the innovative but

unprecedented initiative.

“We just don’t get this kind of opportunity in other states where we operate,” Tretola said. “Now that we have a model and we have results, we think that we have an opportunity to go back to some states and say ‘look what we’ve done here, can we get a similar kind of partnership?’”

“We believe this is so needed that you could put these programs in every state, and you would have a waiting list to get into them.”

Of course, it is not just about the willingness of service providers to participate; shelters also have to be willing to foster their dogs with specific group homes. Matching specific dogs to specific groups of clients, both Chilidonia and Stanton said, is the key to success. Dogs with significant health problems that require extensive medications can be more difficult to match as can clients who are afraid of animals.

While some might suspect that it is difficult for these guys to let their dogs be adopted by other families, they don’t seem to resist the idea that Apollo will eventually move out, as the four before him did.

Bridges said letting go won’t be easy.

“It’s hard because Apollo is unique, at the same time very playful and sweet and lovable,” Bridges said. “It’s like having a son or daughter, and you hate to see them go. Well, it’s the same for animals.”

But this crew of dog trainers has found a quick way to cheer up.

“If they get adopted, what do we do?” Stanton asked.

“Get a new dog,” Holwuttel replied.

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## CHIEFS

FROM B1 efits in 2021, which totaled \$261,921.

The state’s highest-paid superintendent was James Hammond of Ontario-Montclair School District in San Bernardino County. He collected \$743,596 in pay and benefits, partly thanks to generous vacation and sick time payout policies and other benefits.

There’s nothing wrong with superintendents making more than the governor, said Todd Maddison, research director for Transparent California — as long as they can show that they deserve it.

But that’s the problem, Maddison said. Superintendent pay raises are usually not tied to improvements in performance on state measures like the state school dashboard, a district’s enrollment size, or other concrete factors.

“There’s no connection between increasing the pay of the superintendent and

### San Diego’s highest-paid school superintendents in 2021

Name	District	Pay	Pay and benefits	Enrollment 2021-22
Paul Gothold	S.D. Co. Office of Education	\$388,681	\$471,235	955
David Miyashiro	Cajon Valley Union	\$401,563	\$470,889	14,799
Candace Singh	Fallbrook Union Elementary	\$376,939	\$447,963	4,921
Robert Haley	San Dieguito Union High	\$401,714	\$423,989	12,704
Katie McNamara	South Bay Union	\$342,588	\$405,134	4,283
Holly McClurg	Del Mar Union Elementary	\$312,215	\$373,006	3,895
Marian Kim-Phelps	Poway Unified	\$326,084	\$362,767	35,192
Theresa Kemper	Grossmont Union High	\$286,803	\$347,667	17,108
David Feliciano	La Mesa-Spring Valley	\$275,454	\$347,326	10,835
Julie Vitale	Oceanside Unified	\$278,908	\$340,979	16,261

Pay includes salary, overtime, vacation and sick time payouts and other pay, such as car allowances, meeting stipends and bonuses. Benefits represent the employer-paid cost of health, dental and vision medical insurance and retirement contributions.

Sources: California Department of Education; Transparent California

LAURYN SCHROEDER & MICHELLE GILCHRIST U-T

actually providing a better education,” Maddison said.

Instead, superintendents are often given raises based on how satisfied the board is with them, or to match those that were bargained with unions representing other employees.

“I would love to see a superintendent pay scheme

that had a large bonus based on actual improvement,” Maddison said. “Without more money tied to improvement, you’re not going to get improvement with more money.”

Some superintendents have received significant pay raises since that 2021 data was collected.

After taking over as San Diego Unified superintendent on an interim basis in 2021, Jackson officially became superintendent last year. In the new role, he was paid a \$375,000 annual salary, not including benefits or other pay.

In mid-November, the Cajon Valley school board

approved a 7 percent cost-of-living salary increase for Miyashiro, on par with raises given to union-represented employees. His salary is now \$381,236 a year.

Miyashiro’s leadership has recently come under criticism after he suggested hiring as a consultant a school board member who had just been voted out of office. When the contract for her company came up for a vote, Miyashiro did not disclose that the firm belonged to her.

In response to questions this week about his pay, Miyashiro cited his creation of the district’s World of Work program, which exposes students to potential careers early on based on their personality, strengths and skills. He touted recognition the district has drawn from education leaders, think tanks and national media.

Cajon Valley Board President Jim Miller said he has never seen Miyashiro turn down a meeting with a parent and that he returns emails, texts and calls at all

hours of the day and during his time off. He credited Miyashiro with reopening the district’s schools far earlier than most districts during the pandemic and for already having laptops deployed to students before COVID-19.

“You can almost reverse the question when addressing other districts and their superintendents by asking why do any of those that remained closed and (hoarding) their COVID relief funds still have jobs or hold their trustee positions?” Miller wrote in an email.

Officials with the San Diego County Office of Education and Fallbrook Elementary did not immediately respond to questions for this story. Singh, who left Fallbrook last fall, also did not respond.

Singh has previously said that her pay is commensurate with her years in the position, experience and skills and that the district has benefited from the stability she has brought.

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## SMOLENS

FROM B1 grown dramatically since 2008, but because Proposition 8 was effectively nullified, there wasn’t the urgency to remove it from the state constitution.

Now there’s fear that the “zombie” text, as some like to call it, could come alive once again.

Last year, the Supreme Court, with its new conservative majority, voted 5-4 to overturn the Roe v. Wade decision, which for a half-century had guaranteed the right to abortion. That decision left the matter up to the states. In a separate concurring opinion, Justice Clarence Thomas said the court should revisit other decisions, including Obergefell.

None of the other justices joined him on that, but Thomas, nevertheless, set off alarm bells that another constitutional right established by a previous Supreme Court could be undone.

Hence the motivation to remove Proposition 8 from the state constitution. The ballot measure would keep same-sex marriage legal in

California even if Obergefell is struck down.

Wiener and Low need a two-thirds majority in both the Assembly and state Senate to put their measure on the ballot. Given Democrats hold such majorities — and are likely to be joined by some Republicans — there’s virtually no doubt the proposal will go before voters in 2024. As with Proposition 1, Gov. Gavin Newsom supports the same-sex marriage proposal.

“Same-sex marriage is the law of the land and Prop. 8 has no place in our constitution,” the governor said in a statement.

The two ballot proposals have much in common. Both involve intensely debated individual rights that, in large part, define the nation’s cultural divide. Both are state constitutional amendments, driven by Supreme Court rulings, and have overlapping constituencies that are highly motivated to see them approved.

Support for same-sex marriage and abortion rights are nearly identical in California, according to a poll released this month by the Public Policy Institute of California.

The survey found 75 percent of likely voters support allowing same-sex couples to marry, while 73 percent said abortion should be legal in all or most cases. (Proposition 1 was approved in November, 67 percent to 33 percent.)

Same-sex marriage was backed by 89 percent of Democrats, 46 percent of Republicans and 77 percent of independents. The right to abortion in all or most cases was supported by 86 percent of Democrats, 45 percent of Republicans and 78 percent of independents.

Solid majorities supported both regardless of age, ethnicity, income or education.

Now for the differences. The Supreme Court did not overturn the constitutionality of same-sex marriages; only one justice suggested revisiting that issue. The argument can be made that people become more politically animated once a constitutional right has been taken away, rather than threatened.

Despite limits on abortion in various states and the constant pressure from conservatives to do so on a national level, it was only after Roe was overturned that

active support for abortion rights exploded so broadly across the body politic.

Several states last year voted in favor of abortion protections or against measures to dismantle them. Despite projections of a Republican landslide last year, Democrats expanded their Senate majority and nearly held on to the House of Representatives because abortion was a top-line election issue.

In states with abortion-related ballot measures, including California, exit surveys revealed about 4 in 10 voters said the Supreme Court’s ruling to overturn Roe played a major role in their decision to vote.

Meanwhile, the Democratic majorities in Congress were joined by some Republicans late last year in passing the Respect for Marriage Act, which requires states to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states.

Congress last year also repealed the Defense of Marriage Act, a 1996 law that defined marriage as between one man and one woman and allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages

allowed by other states.

(In contrast, efforts to codify Roe have failed in Congress, and members of the new Republican House majority are pushing bills to greatly limit, if not outlaw, abortion nationally.)

Regardless, the Supreme Court’s ruling on Roe and Thomas’ opinion made clear that rights once seemingly secure may not be in the future.

Presidential election-year dynamics aside, there will be plenty of voter enthusiasm to make sure the menacing Proposition 8 cannot be revived.

### Tweet of the Week

Goes to Jeremy B. White (@JeremyBWhite) of Politico regarding the 1992 election.

“What @BarbaraBoxer told me about her and @SenFeinstein in those days: ‘Things that were said at that time were so outrageous — like, I can vote for one woman but I can’t vote for two. There was so much prejudice out there, you can’t even imagine.’”

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