

Dynamiting the Siskiyou Pass

**AND OTHER SHORT STORIES
FROM OREGON AND BEYOND**

Bill Meulemans

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DYNAMITING THE SISKIYOU PASS
And Other Stories from Oregon and Beyond
©2023 Bill Meulemans

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Contents

<i>Foreword by Oregon State Senator Jeff Golden.....</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Preface.....</i>	<i>x</i>
1. A Pleasant Caldron.....	1
2. Dynamiting the Siskiyou Pass.....	11
3. Conspiratorial Thinking.....	17
4. Paradise Lost in Wasco County.....	23
5. Raising the Flag on Campus.....	33
6. “Vortex 1” at McIver Park.....	37
7. Presidents in the Eyes of Children.....	45
8. Politics of the ’60s.....	51
9. Is Empathy a Burden?.....	59
10. Hanging Out with the Hells Angels.....	67
11. The Rotary Club Trap.....	75
12. Meeting the Enemy.....	81
13. Falling in Love – Falling in Line.....	89
14. What the Nazis Did to Us.....	97
15. The Ku Klux Klan as Victims.....	103
16. Surrounded by Threats.....	113
17. Souls That Can Be Saved.....	117
18. The John Birch Christmas Party.....	123
19. What Could Possible Go Wrong?.....	131
20. Roosevelt and Trump.....	137
21. A Small-Town Dictator.....	147

Dynamiting the Siskiyou Pass and Other Stories from Oregon and Beyond

22. Getting into the Soviet Embassy.....155

23. The Poor People’s Conference.....161

24. Doing the Right Thing.....173

25. The Conscience of the Senate.....181

26. What’s it All About?.....189

27. It Keeps Good Time.....197

28. Lennie’s Hopes and Dreams.....203

29. Surviving a War.....209

30. The Cross-Hairs of Our Rifles.....217

31. A Matter of Perspective.....223

About the Author.....231

Foreword

I spent my first decade in Oregon tucked away in remote corners of Oregon's Rogue Valley, trying to shake my head clear of elite academic theories in order to learn enough survival skills to face the social and economic collapse that was, I was somehow sure, just around the corner. As the Nixon years gave way to the ten-minute Ford Administration and then the Carter years, an older yearning to get into the fray—I had Presidential ambitions around the same time I played Little League baseball—flared back up. I dropped back in.

The first step was part-time classes at Southern Oregon State College, now Southern Oregon University, in Ashland, fifteen miles up Interstate 5 from the California border. If you were on that campus in 1980 with even marginal interest in how politics works, Bill Meulemans was part of your life. I don't think a year's gone by since then that I haven't talked to an Oregonian who's named him as an important mentor.

There are a lot of reasons for that: the base of knowledge he brought to political science, paired with an active curiosity to learn more; a continuous willingness to question what he himself believed; the interest and energy he invested in every student that came to him; a knack for blending political theory and practice, especially when it came to how campaigns are won and lost. The teaching that stuck with and guided me when I entered elective politics was the tongue-in-cheek sorting of voters into "sinners"

(those who would never in a million years vote for you), “saints” (those who are solidly with you, essentially your “base”) and “savables” (the subset of voters, vanishingly rare these days, who aren’t fully committed to either you or your opponent). Winning candidates spend a small percentage of their precious time and energy thanking and energizing the saints; everything else is directed towards the savables. Do not give in to the urge to pull the sinners over to your side (a potent urge for those of us whose collection of high school debate trophies left us thinking we’re irresistibly persuasive). That’s time wasted. Wasted time loses races.

That’s just one of the gifts I’ve received from Bill over the years. Top of the list is an endearing friendship, even though we’ve shared little time together since he left SOU to do landmark work on political conflict in Ireland and elsewhere. Hearing his voice on the phone takes me back to conversations on gentle Ashland afternoons on his shady back porch, hearing his shrewd, human and deeply humane take on current politics—the individual and collective decisions we make on how we’re going to live together. That practical and gentle perspective shines through the vivid stories of this book from first to last.

I found it an immense pleasure to read. Assuming that you’re interested in what makes people tick, how that plays out in our politics, and how all of it can be nudged towards the kind of world we’d like to live in, I think you will, too.

*Oregon State Senator Jeff Golden
Salem, Oregon
March 27, 2023*

Preface

“Put down your pencils,
I’m going to tell you a story...”

When I said, “Put down your pencils,” I found that my college students listened with a greater purpose. Their pencils were down, but their minds were more open than usual. They wanted to hear a story – to visualize the involvement of real people in a particular situation. I also discovered that they gained a greater understanding of a topic in which I was personally involved. Students, like everyone else, love to hear a personalized version of a tale. It makes everything come to life.

Stories let us share information in a way that creates a human connection. It catches our attention and engages us at a personal level. We are much more likely to understand an event if the background is highlighted. Knowing how it happened makes it come alive in our minds.

Is there any better way to learn than through a story? How else can we shine a bright light into all the dark corners of life? Hearing or reading an account of a new adventure is an exciting way to take a trip without leaving home. A well-told story is the next best thing to being there.

Don Hewitt, the producer of *60 Minutes*, the longest running prime-time program on American television repeatedly told his

correspondents, “Tell me a story.” It turns out that his call for a story is still the reason for the program’s success. Every segment draws us into an important topic. It works on television and it works in real life. We all identify with dramatic stories. There’s a special transformation when we imagine what we would do in a similar circumstance. There’s no substitute for a good tale with a built-in lesson at the end.

This book is a personalized series of stories that highlight how life has evolved in Oregon and elsewhere since the 1960s. It is presented through the eyes of someone who treasured every minute of the unusual turn of events from then to now.

ONE

A Pleasant Caldron

There's a natural tendency to fall in love with Ashland, Oregon. It happened to me in two days. First, I drove through the downtown plaza that was so quaint and inviting. Then, almost by accident, I drove into the 100-acre Lithia Park as it wound up through a picturesque little valley with a bandshell and many places to just sit and contemplate life. Clearly, the Park was designed for nature lovers. On that first day I saw a deer grazing up on a hill. There were children throwing bread crumbs to the ducks in the ponds just behind the trees. To top off the scene, there was a creek that meandered through the Park down behind the plaza. What was not to love?

For me, coming to Ashland was like opening a series of Christmas presents. During my first two days in town, I opened a couple of presents each day as I explored the small-town setting with a touch of a sophistication that I had not seen before. Like so many other people who've had the same experience, I was ready to settle down and make it my home.

There were plenty of college teaching positions available when I got out of graduate school, but one caught my eye. I had heard

about an opening at Southern Oregon College (now Southern Oregon University) in Ashland. It was an opportunity to teach political science in a liberal arts college in a small-town setting, nestled at the foot of the Siskiyou Mountains near the California border. It was love at first-site.

Ashland is an upscale, artsy, community known for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and its charming atmosphere. The city has a progressive reputation that attracts people from all over the country. More than 100,000 people flock to Ashland every year to see world-class theatrical productions. The motto is “stay four days, see four plays.” Southern Oregon University prides itself with a well-qualified faculty and a culturally-diverse student body. The pubs and book shops of Ashland are filled with actors and academicians. It’s a great place to live.

But there is an “underground” dimension in this part of Oregon that is not noticed by outsiders. In reality Ashland is a liberal enclave surrounded by a region of Oregon that has been friendly to the Ku Klux Klan. In the 1920s Klan members wore their full regalia as they were photographed marching proudly past the city library down Siskiyou Boulevard in Ashland’s 4th of July Parade. During these times there were stories about the Sheriff of Jackson County and several deputies being Klansmen. This part of Oregon had “sundown laws” that served as a warning to Black folks that they “shouldn’t let the sun set on their backs” in the Rogue Valley.

But when I arrived in southern Oregon in 1964, most of the Klan hoods and robes had been put away in the hall closets, but the old attitudes lingered on with conservative activists and timber-products workers. There were still local folks who saw themselves as the defenders of a conservative, whites-only society that proudly upheld “American” values. There was also a strong dose of anti-Communism

sentiments along with a gun culture that had a national reputation. Outside of town there was an unusual number of pickup trucks with gun racks in the back window. Some said affectionately this was a “little piece of Alabama tucked away in Oregon.”

The hinterlands belonged to the hardhats, but there was an identifiable group inside of Ashland that was counter-culture. There was a patchwork of operating communes where young people shared their work and incomes in a very progressive environment. On a typical evening in Ashland, one had a choice of going to meetings on gay rights, home-made jewelry-making, or hearing about the finer points of Trotskyite theory. The mayor of Ashland was a self-proclaimed socialist and one candidate for the city council was a long-time sympathizer of the Communist Party. Ashland was a left-wing hub with right-wing spokes that spread out in every direction. People outside of the city were constantly shocked by the kinds of things that went on there.

Strangely, the situation was pretty much of a one-way street. The liberal elite inside of Ashland had little awareness or concern about those outside the city limits; they didn't know about them and didn't care. But right-wing folks in the outside areas knew exactly what was going on in Ashland. People in the surrounding cities of Medford, Central Point, Grants Pass, and Klamath Falls watched local TV and read the daily newspapers. Folks in other parts of Jackson, Josephine, and Klamath counties had real concerns about how much the progressive element inside of Ashland was changing the political/social culture of southern Oregon. There were candidates elected in Ashland that wouldn't have stood a chance outside the city limits. I had friends on both sides of the divide, and it was very clear that some right-wing folks in the Valley felt they were outsiders. They brought up the subject repeat-

edly. I was constantly amazed by the opposing orientations of the two groups. They lived in two different worlds.

Southern Oregon was a melting pot that never melted. There was no blending between the contending political/social clusters. Tourists could stroll the streets of Ashland enjoying the yuppie shops without realizing that there were right-wing and left-wing groups hiding in the hills nearby who saw themselves as revolutionaries. Few visitors to southern Oregon knew that this region was the home of opposing political underground movements. There were all sorts of clandestine operations going on that were not noticed by governmental officials.

I realized early on that there was an opportunity to bring leaders from both sides into my classroom. I began offering a course titled, "Political Extremism in America" in which I focused on comparing and contrasting ideological leaders of the left and right in local politics. In my course on "Oregon Politics," I also brought in elected officials from throughout the state. It was during the mid-1960s, a time of clashing ideologies in American politics. The pendulum was swinging back and forth from left to right in every corner of the country.

Upon my arrival in 1964, Barry Goldwater won the Republican presidential nomination with the support of many local right-wing voters, but he was trounced across the country. A few years later in 1972, a leading liberal, George McGovern, won the Democratic presidential nomination, but he was defeated by an even greater national margin. In the meantime, the Vietnam War was raging, the Black Panthers were on the streets in urban areas, and the Students for a Democratic Society were gearing up to shut down college campuses. Here in Oregon, there were right-wing militia groups in the mountains who had a cache of weapons (inside of

caves) encased in a protective coating. Less than twenty miles away, in a hidden valley, there was a smaller, left-wing faction that dreamed of radicalizing the West Coast. Strangely, both sides knew of the other, but they were more interested in getting ready to fight than actually attacking each other.

Getting to know folks in the right-wing underground was a slow process for me. I spent lots of evenings going to events around the Valley to attend meetings that featured traveling “true-believers” full of conspiracy theories who warned of an impending Communist takeover that could bring the United States to its knees. Every few weeks there would be a speaker in Medford or Grants Pass who came in from the outside with the same message: “It’s worse than you think and we’ve got to be ready to fight back.” I got to know the local guys who sat in the front row at each meeting and didn’t miss a word. It wasn’t long before we were on a first-name basis. We actually became friends. They talked at length about their dedication to fighting Communists, but they felt it was a lonely task because most people in Rogue Valley were too busy raising their families and didn’t really share the feeling of being on the front lines of an attempted Communist take-over.

Most Oregonians got their news about militant groups by reading the newspapers or watching TV specials. Yet in the Rogue Valley, all I had to do was just drive a few miles out of town where I could meet with folks that were on the cutting-edge of extremist movements. They were easy to miss because they seldom did anything that attracted attention. My strategy was to go to their meetings and ask the question, “Do you have any idea of why this is happening?” I was constantly amazed by what I heard. There were small segments dotted around the Valley that saw a very different political/cultural/religious reality.

One of my earliest contacts was with a religious sect that believed they were involved in an epic struggle involving the fate of our entire country. They showed me a picture of an FBI show-badge with the number “666” on it which they said was the “sign of the beast.” Their leader told me that the badge was a sign from God that the Devil had taken over the US Department of Justice and probably all of Washington, D.C. He said, “Everything that happens there must be viewed through that perspective.” In his view, this was a justification for revolution. It was a holy crusade that could not be lost.

The leader of that church was a preacher who carried a gun. He warned that Christians should take up arms and prepare for Armageddon. His group met in a run-down building they called “The Valley Miracle Center.” There were stories of people whose eyesight had been restored and cripples who were able to walk. I attended meetings in which people were “speaking in tongues,” but I never met anyone who had been healed. He and others in the church felt under-appreciated by the vast majority of Americans who weren’t paying any attention to what they thought was a real demonic threat.

Most of these men were law-abiding folks in theory, but there were a few in the Rogue Valley that had already crossed the line. One leader from Grants Pass (who I didn’t know) was arrested by federal agents for having a cache of stolen military small arms along and an anti-tank weapon he carried in the trunk of his motor-home. Another man in Central Point I knew well, was arrested in his home by Treasury Agents who found that he had a whole sheet of \$20 bills on his kitchen table that had not been cut yet. His defense was that he was going to use the money to support his political efforts. Knowing of his disorganized personal demeanor,

I wasn't surprised to learn that the counterfeit bills were of poor quality.

One member of a southern Oregon right-wing group kept telling me, "Politics is about bullets, not ballots." That particular person was one I would call a "super-patriot." He said every time he read the Constitution it brought tears to his eyes. He and his comrades professed a great love of their country, and they were ready to fight another revolution out of fear that leftists were poised to take over the nation. They spent a lot of time planning for the future.

On the other side were left-wing groups that had migrated in from northern California. These were ardent environmentalists from Oakland and San Francisco who were planning to sabotage the timber-products industry. There were communes nestled into valleys that dead-ended in the high timber. The Siskiyou mountains along the California/Oregon border were a perfect hiding place for self-styled activists who were making preparations for a showdown they believed could come any day.

Most people in southern Oregon didn't know about the underground activists that were hiding out in plain sight. In some respects, the area was an ideal breeding ground for survivalists, super-patriots, hippies, and marijuana growers. An unsuspecting person didn't have to go too far off the beaten track to be in an area where they were not welcome. I knew of several remote areas that were off-limits to the outside world. Law enforcement officers knew about the nests of "gun nuts," and others, but the general orientation of the police was to leave well enough alone.

There was a strong tradition of rugged individualism in this part of Oregon. Many who came here wanted to be left alone. Both left- and right-wing groups were seeking an independence from the regular restrictions that applied to everyone else. Yet along with that

sense of freedom came the feeling of being surrounded by unseen enemies that were closing in on them. The will to fight back was always present. There was a defensive characteristic among these lonely stalwarts at both ends of the political spectrum.

During the Cold War, several survivalist groups from around the country came to southern Oregon because it was far away from military bases and major cities that would be targets in the event of a nuclear war. They also reckoned that this part of Oregon would be safer because it was not down-wind from areas that would be contaminated by nuclear radiation. These folks made no attempt to integrate into the Rogue Valley. The only way I knew of their existence was because some of these new arrivals took my Political Extremism course. They told me they wanted to learn about extremist groups so they could defend themselves in the event there was a breakdown of society. They lived off the beaten path and just wanted to be left alone.

There's always been a strong isolationist, anti-government element in southern Oregon that dates back many years. Folks in the southern part of the state have regularly distrusted government at all levels. Many guests in my classes boasted that they didn't pay taxes of any kind. Others said that they had purposely ignored building codes and inspectors when building and remodeling buildings in remote areas. They boasted on the number of guns they had at home. Most of them were proud that tax levies in their communities faced tough opposition from local voters. Josephine County had the lowest property tax in the state, yet they turned down a levy on police protection that forced the sheriff to lay off most of the deputies and release some local prisoners. Many folks in southern Oregon distrusted any kind of governmental activity.

Folks in these parts of rural Oregon have long felt alienated

from the more densely populated areas near Portland, Salem, and Eugene. More than 40 percent of Oregon's population lives in the Portland metro area. Folks in eastern and southern Oregon feel like they are at the end of the pumpkin vine. There's been a move among several counties of southern Oregon to join with rural parts of northern California to form a new state called "Jefferson." Recently there's been a similar move with eleven counties of eastern Oregon voting to join the state of Idaho.

The voting patterns of rural and urban Oregon also differ widely. In 2020, for example, Democrat Joe Biden won the state with 56.9 percent of the vote, but he carried only 8 of Oregon's 36 counties. Donald Trump won the expansive rural areas, but Biden carried the cities by a comfortable margin. Typically, eastern and southern Oregon are solidly Republican while the urban areas of the northern part of the state are reliably Democratic. The Interstate 5 corridor passes through counties that include more than 80 percent of Oregon's population. There are many parts of the state that are seldom noticed by the city folks who hold a large majority.

The rural/urban split is a constant source of conflict. Often it is more important to find out what part of the state people are from than to find out if they are a Republican or a Democrat. To an outsider, Oregon seems to be one happy family, but there's a lot of disagreement boiling just below the surface.

Dynamiting the Siskiyou Pass and Other Stories from Oregon and Beyond

TWO

Dynamiting the Siskiyou Pass

Interstate 5 is the main thoroughfare on the West Coast of the United States. The interstate freeway stretches all the way from Canada to the Mexican border. One of the most vulnerable points of the highway is the Siskiyou Pass located on the California/Oregon border. The Pass has an elevation of 4,310 feet where it cuts through the mountainous area. Keeping it open is of vital importance to interstate commerce and national defense. But in the mid-1960s there was a small group of self-appointed militia members who were prepared to dynamite the Siskiyou Pass.

It was a stunning surprise to me when I heard the plans of four men in Medford, Oregon, who had plans to dynamite the Pass in order to block an invasion of Communists they believed were going to sweep up through Oregon all the way to Seattle. I actually stumbled on the information while talking to several men that spoke about an armed invasion from California. At first their comments were rather vague, but all that changed one evening after four of them spoke in one of my classes at the college. By this

time, they knew me pretty well and were inclined to let down their guard a bit and tell me certain things about their operations.

After my students left the classroom, these men told me that their main task was to get ready to dynamite the Siskiyou pass and block the Interstate 5 freeway from California in the event of an invasion from northern California. They said they had “intelligence” that there was a build-up of Communists in the forest lands on the California side of the summit, and that the enemy was forming an invading army that would use Interstate 5 to advance north and fan out in Portland and Seattle. I asked if they had seen the threatening army. They said no, but they were certain they were there. One of the guys thought that the invading army was mostly Chinese Communists, the other three said they were sure that they were “California Radicals” from the Bay Area. At any rate, these four men were getting ready to stop them at the pass.

A sense of duty prevailed with these four modern patriots. They wanted to be a part of something bigger than themselves – perhaps a part of history. One said he felt a little bit like a modern Paul Revere – warning this generation of Americans that they were being invaded. All of them kept the dynamite in the trunks of their cars so it would be ready to use when the time came.

I soon discovered that the plan to “close the pass” was not just idle chatter. They told me they had practiced several dry runs whereby their leader would call the other three on the phone during the night or early in the morning to see how quickly they could drive from their homes in Medford to the Siskiyou Summit. It was a twenty-six mile trip and they said their best time was thirty-seven minutes (on a stop-watch) to arrive and place their charges in dug out locations alongside the freeway. They were really proud of how fast they were able to put the charge in holes that had already been dug.

Dynamiting the Siskiyou Pass

Later I drove up the freeway by myself to the summit but could not find any dug-out holes for the explosives. Actually, the highway through the pass at the Siskiyou Pass was quite wide and I did not see how they could close down the freeway. I don't know anything about dynamite, but they must have had a fair amount to blow up that pass. I asked them about the specific area where they would put the charge. They sensed my doubts on the operation and assured me they had stolen several boxes of high-grade dynamite from an abandoned mining operation, "more than enough to do the job."

This was their mission, and they saw themselves as "soldiers" who were ready to defend the whole Pacific Northwest against a possible invasion. I recall that they had an absolute devotion to the cause. They had an overwhelming sense of obligation to defend the rest of us who didn't know that an invasion was imminent. Their leader was a retired US Navy Seal who told me he was more than willing to give his life to "our country." He said that stopping the invasion would be the "most important thing in his life."

My relationship with these folks was always friendly. I discovered early on that they would be more likely to bare their souls if they thought I would give them a fair hearing. All I had to do was ask. One evening after a get-together in Medford, I pushed a bit beyond the conversation we had earlier. I asked why they carried guns on those trips up the mountain to put the dynamite in place? They looked at me with disbelief: "Why wouldn't we carry guns?" the leader asked. Then he went on to say, "What if someone tried to stop us?" I could tell that they knew the next question: "If government agents or the state patrol tried to stop you, what would you do?"

The silence was awkward. They didn't want to answer at first. Then the leader said he felt the obligation to defend this country

no matter what the authorities might do. To him the most important thing was stopping the invasion from the south. They all looked at each other with blank stares as they each nodded their heads. I didn't disagree. I followed up with the question of whether "the government had the right to overrule them," but I could tell they didn't want to go there.

After that exchange I thought a lot about self-appointed patriots of the right and left, and how the political system should react to those who were willing to use deadly force. The ones I knew viewed government as part of the problem. Being anti-Communist and anti-government in their minds were almost the same thing.

In their minds the concept of "America" was a symbol elevated above what most of us would see as the government. They had a higher calling: it was to defend the rest of us even if we opposed them. I didn't know how to respond to that idea because that put their group at a level beyond everyone else. They saw themselves as a truly patriotic, independent force.

In their minds the task of defending the country was more important because almost no one else was aware of the impending danger. It was assumed that the US military had been misled by shadowy figures that were controlled by our enemies. "You can't count on the police or the army," they said. Their assumption was that nearly everyone else had been "bought off" or were unaware of the situation. I asked "how many people in the Rogue Valley knew about this threat? They shook their heads with a resigned smile commenting that the great majority of the American people won't give much thought to losing their country until it's too late.

One of the characteristics shared by these revolutionaries was a sense of destiny. They felt they were meant to be a part of history, that they will be remembered for doing something very important.

There was a constant reference to our revolutionary history. As I noted earlier, one of the men planning to dynamite the Siskiyou Pass saw himself as a modern Paul Revere.

Keep in mind, members of the mob that stormed the Capitol on January 6th 2021, were yelling, “This is our 1776.” Many people then and now are fulfilling a revolutionary identity that will give their life a higher purpose. They were seeking an opportunity to save the country from a threat we didn’t perceive. Does this sound familiar?

Most of us don’t think much about these right-wing activists. We may believe they are basically honorable American patriots who just happen to be just a bit overzealous. Then in 2021 there was a real political insurrection. This truly was a wake-up call for middle-America who earlier could not see any real problem with groups who carried the US flag and a gun.

To understand all the factors in this situation, it is necessary to consider the personal benefits that accrue to those persons involved in causes that are bigger than life. It’s a pretty “heady” experience to take up arms in defense of your country while others are unaware that there’s a danger. Under these circumstances they are the “Minute Men” that were warning the rest of us. These activists are propelled by a feeling of self-importance that few of us can appreciate.

Consider the thoughts of folks who came from all over the country to storm the Capitol building on January 6, 2021. They were volunteers who felt a purpose to take matters into their own hands. There was a feeling among them that they had no other choice but to “revolt.” Many of them felt they were acting in our behalf. In their judgment there was nothing more important than saving “their country.” While others were sitting at home watching TV, these self-appointed heroes felt a calling not unlike that of the four men who planned to dynamite the Siskiyou Pass.

We sometimes make the mistake of just condemning political violence by declaring the perpetrators were “wrong” in their goals and that they should be punished for disobeying the law. Some of us may simply view political violence as a law enforcement problem that doesn’t concern us individually.

Instead, perhaps we should ask ourselves why there are thousands of people in our society who feel justified in taking up arms against established order? How has this idea been spread from coast to coast? Are cable-news and social media accountable for fermenting this cause? What are the names of elected officials who supported the Insurrection? Do we all bear some responsibility because we elected those officials? Can our democratic institutions survive continued armed insurrections?

The fate of our democracy may depend on your acceptance of a civic responsibility to take political action before it is too late.