

The Bulletin

Guest column: The contributions of Bend's Bill Niskanen

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December 31, 2018

In a very odd way, former Bend resident Bill Niskanen made the news recently. This is particularly noteworthy, since Dr. Niskanen passed away in 2011 at age 78.

Recently columnist David Brooks wrote a favorable opinion piece in the New York Times about the Niskanen Center. This is an important national think tank named in honor of our own Bill Niskanen.

Niskanen was born and raised in Bend. After graduating from Bend High School, Bill Niskanen earned a bachelor's degree at Harvard and then a Ph.D. in economics at the University of Chicago. As a professional economist, Niskanen worked for the RAND Corporation and as chief economist for Ford. He taught at Cal-Berkley and UCLA. Niskanen also worked in government, first for the Office of Management and Budget and later as a member of Ronald Reagan's Council of Economic Advisers. Niskanen finished his career as the chairman of the CATO Institute. All of this from humble beginnings in Bend, Oregon. Let your children know that the sky is the limit if you work hard and smart.

As many of you may know, Brooks is a very well-respected moderate conservative. You may also know that he has absolutely no respect for our current president. In fact, he has written many columns over the past couple of years looking for Republican alternatives to President Donald Trump and his current chokehold on that party.

This is what brought Brooks to write about the Niskanen Center. The Niskanen Center was established in 2015 and named in honor Dr. Niskanen. Many of the folks who formed the Niskanen Center had worked with Niskanen at CATO. A few years back they had become disenchanted with CATO and began the Niskanen Center. As they saw it, CATO's libertarian ideology distorted and biased its analysis and policy recommendations.

Brooks' recent opinion piece in the Times sees the Niskanen Center as an encouraging attempt to rescue the Republican Party from Trump. That is, to bring it back to moderate Republican values.

Like Brooks, I am sad and embarrassed that Trump is our president. Unlike Brooks, I am not a moderate Republican; I am a moderate Democrat. And like Niskanen, I am a professional economist.

As an economist, I encourage all of you to go to the Niskanen Center website to see what reformed libertarian economists can do when they replace ideology with science and evidence.

One of the first things they noticed is that nations with very limited government (what libertarians advocate) are almost always poor. Think of the Third World countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, in which the government sector is often small and/or corrupt. Next they noticed that nations with a reasonably sized government (15 percent to 30 percent of GDP) were the richest nations. Think of Western Europe, Japan, South Korea, Canada and of course the USA.

I would like to add my own thought about the size of government; the quality of government is significantly more important than its relative size. Developed nations, like ours, have enjoyed decades or centuries of governments that are relatively honest and competent.

When you visit the Niskanen Center website you will see many of the traditional American values that Trump opposes. You will see that the Niskanen Center supports immigration, free trade, equal rights for women and minorities, protecting the environment, adequate welfare, modest regulation, fiscal responsibility and public investments in education, infrastructure and research. Again, in stark contrast to our president, the Niskanen Center promotes honesty, moderation, respectful political debates and the rule of law.

I can see why Brooks wanted to steer his readers to the Niskanen Center website. I recommend you go check it out; it does an admirable job of honoring the legacy of Bend's native son, Dr. Bill Niskanen.