



# BRIAN SONNTAG

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"A WATCHDOG THAT BARKS"

BY BOB YOUNG

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### “A WATCHDOG THAT BARKS”

**T**he Port of Seattle is more visible than most public agencies. Sea-Tac International Airport? That's Port property. Cruise ships? They dock at the Port. Massive cranes plucking cargo containers off super-freighters south of downtown? Yep, the Port.

In 1992, work began on a third Sea-Tac runway, one of the largest and most challenging public works projects in regional history. Half-a-million truckloads of dirt and 15 years later, rumors flew about single-bid deals and “tummy rubs” for contractors. Moving all that dirt turned out to be fetid business.

It was ripe, in 2007, for State Auditor Brian Sonntag.

Sonntag was part of a well-known political family in Tacoma that touted “Hire me,” as its citizen-centric creed. The latest of the clan to hold office, Sonntag seemed more golden retriever than snarling watchdog. But he had a skeptical side sharpened by Tacoma's scandals, the Kennedy assassinations, and Watergate. And, as state auditor, he was set on adding bite to what had been his office's rather tame oversight of every state and local unit of government in Washington. Voters gave him new authority to evaluate not just finances but the performance—the efficiency and effectiveness—of public agencies.

Sonntag's audit of the third runway landed just before Christmas 2007 in reporters' mailboxes and warmed their keyboards. They called it “blistering” and “scorching.” Sonntag pointed to \$97 million likely wasted in third runway contracts—including one that ballooned from \$10 million to \$120 million without any rebidding. He outlined another cozy deal struck at a steakhouse, and conveyed on a napkin to Port contract-managers.

Sonntag's other stinging audits revealed government waste on misused phones, padded salaries, Medicaid payments for erectile implants, and phantom work by minority contractors, the last leading to the firing of Seattle's public-schools superintendent.



Sonntag was honored by the National Freedom of Information Coalition and the Society of Professional Journalists. A judge said he “talks the talk and walks the walk.” *Brian Sonntag*

Sonntag was inducted in an auditor’s version of Cooperstown, the State Open Government Hall of Fame.

Newspapers were among his biggest fans. “Washington taxpayers have no greater friend than Brian Sonntag,” said *The Columbian* in Clark County. “You’ll notice we haven’t yet defined Sonntag by political party or hometown as is customary when writing about politicians. That’s because Sonntag is not much of a politician, a pretty lousy one, in fact. But he’s a great state auditor, and for almost two decades has saved taxpayers millions of dollars.”

Yet, some questioned, even knocked, the value of his work. Others accused him of showboating. Lawmakers, perhaps resentful of his power, sheared his budget. The chairman of the state Democratic Party all but excommunicated him from the flock. Sonntag’s successor, Troy Kelley, went to federal prison.

Kelley’s fall pained Sonntag, particularly because it stained the reputation of the auditor’s office. He sat in a dreary courtroom for every day of Kelley’s two trials. It led him to wonder about the lasting impact of his own work. “I’ve asked myself that question enough times since I left office,” he says. “But we can’t control anything previous or afterwards.”

A weight-lifter with a welcome handshake, Sonntag took a job that was likened to Nyquil and turned it into the most populist pulpit in the state. He was endorsed by groups from the Women’s Political Caucus to the Gun Owners’ Action League. He won 64 percent of the vote in the 2008 election for his fifth and, what turned out to be, final term.

The job fit him like his broad-shouldered size-52 jacket. He tapped into a rising tide of taxpayer angst about government accountability. He grabbed headlines without appearing ambitious.

In 2012, after considering a run for governor, he stepped away from politics entirely, at the age of 61. He decided to quit early rather than too late, consonant with his thrifty outlook. Twenty years in Olympia was enough. A hardcore baseball fan,



BRIAN SONNTAG HAS FOUR great passions he has remained loyal to throughout his life. They are: John F. Kennedy, Willie Mays, The Beach Boys, and coaching legend John Wooden.

What bonds them is that Sonntag was a child of the 1960s—but more so the half of the decade that came before tie-dye, Woodstock, and Vietnam War protests. He came of age in the heyday of “Surfin’ U.S.A.,” the space race, and ask-what-you-can-do-for-your-country pride.

The era’s shooting star was JFK. Sonntag was a Catholic school third grader when the charismatic Kennedy was elected president and the nation’s capital became 20th century Camelot.

“That’s a pretty young age to be interested in any political thing,” Sonntag recalls. “But he was kind of captivating. He didn’t look like any politician we’d ever heard of, and listened to.”

When Sonntag was in sixth grade, his father pulled him out of school one Friday and took him to Tacoma’s Cheney Stadium. It was September 27, 1963, and unusually warm. Local musician Beth Peder-son sang “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” to the crowd waiting for President Kennedy’s arrival and speech. It would be his last visit to Washington, two months before his death.

The crowd of 25,000 was twice as large as expected. Surrounded by a forest of encroaching adults, Sonntag recalls straining to glimpse JFK, as the president came near, while shaking hands after his speech. The youngster thought he might get trampled by



JFK began his speech at Cheney Stadium joking that a Tacoma political dynasty—Mayor Harold Tollefson and state Rep. Thor Tollefson—made him feel better about employing his brother, RFK. *Tacoma Public Library*



In 1948, customers lined up at Pierce County Auditor Jack Sonntag’s office to purchase special license plates. Cashier Clare Radek shows Sonntag a plate reserved for businessman S.A. “Sam” Perkins. *Tacoma Public Library, Richards Studio*



Brian Sonntag got his first baseball glove at the age of 2. In third grade he played on the St. Patrick Catholic School's squad, (top row, third from right). *Brian Sonntag*

Kennedy's adoring fans.

His dad, Jack Sonntag, Sr., was a loyal Democrat, and a first generation American. His father, John Walton Wilson, came to the U.S. from Scotland. A plumber by trade, Wilson married Louisa Sonntag, whose family was of German ancestry. The couple settled in Tacoma. Louisa died during the pandemic of 1918.

When Jack Senior was 11, he was adopted by his deceased mom's parents. His last name was legally changed to Sonntag and he later returned to Tacoma, where he went to work in local gas stations. In 1934, he married Jean Misgen, who he had met in the small store her family owned. The Depression-era couple learned how to “squeeze a nickel.”

Always sharp with figures, Jack Senior worked in accounting. He was a field auditor for the State Tax Commission when local Democratic officials approached him about seeking the position of Pierce County Auditor. Joseph Ford, who had been the incumbent, was accused of embezzlement, removed from office, and later sent to prison.

Jack Senior was appointed county auditor in 1948, and won a full term in the next year's election. His reputation as a youth baseball coach helped. (One of the players he coached was Jack Tanner, who later became the first African-American federal court judge in Washington state.) Sonntag was a “baseball nut,” his wife Jean said, and well known in Tacoma sports circles. He held the auditor's post until his death in 1969.

Jack and Jean had three boys, Jack Junior, Dick and Brian. “I was sort of the accidental third,” Brian Sonntag says. “My brothers were 9 and 15 when I was born, and dad was 45.”

He spent most of his youth living in Tacoma's North End near the University of Puget Sound. He got his first baseball glove while a toddler, and played early and often. If there weren't enough kids for a game, you only needed three to play "pickle," or two for Wiffle ball, or just one if you had an active imagination and a tennis ball to throw against a wall or steps.

And if wasn't he playing baseball, he read about it. In the days long before ESPN, he checked daily box scores in newspapers. He collected baseball cards and memorized players' statistics. He listened to the radio, and could even pick up his beloved San Francisco Giants' games after the sun went down over Puget Sound.

"BE TRUE TO YOUR SCHOOL,"

The Beach Boys harmonized, in their matching flannel surfer shirts. But Brian Sonntag wasn't singing that tune. School was not a favorite pastime. A jokester, he got on the bad side of one teacher, a former U.S. Marine, and an avid duck-hunter. The teacher kept one of his trophy ducks, stuffed and hanging from the ceiling, in his

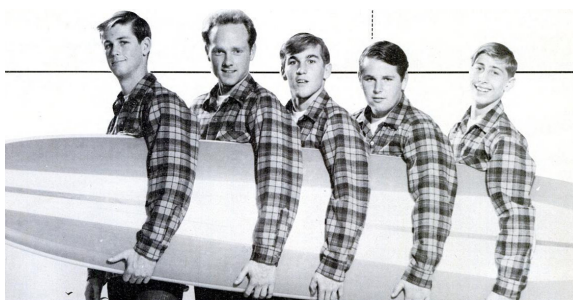
junior-high classroom. One morning he discovered the duck's neck drooping limply. It had been snapped. He blamed Sonntag and a classmate.

"I'd never do anything like that," Sonntag recalls. "I'd give anybody a bad time. Class clown. Make jokes. Do all kind of things. But I'm not going to break his duck's neck. But he believed we did it."

Sonntag had to take tests out in the hallway and watch films seated at the teacher's desk. "And that way, I couldn't talk to anybody or disrupt anybody else," he says. "And that's always kind of angered me." That treatment, and his undiagnosed attention-deficit, diminished his interest in schoolwork.

The baseball diamond was more comfortable. The grass underfoot, the clouds above, the fairness of the rules, with every team getting the same number of outs, and no clock, so you couldn't stall to win. He played on his high-school varsity team as a first baseman and pitcher. "I describe my ability as extremely average," he says. "I wasn't particularly good at anything. But, man, I had fun."

Sonntag gravitated to another pursuit that involved swinging sticks. He took up drumming in the eighth grade. "And that was the time of everybody playing



If Brian Sonntag's father's name hadn't been changed when he was adopted, the state auditor would've been Brian Wilson, the same as his musical hero (left). *Wikimedia*

in a garage, whether you were any good or not,” he recalls.

He wasn’t counterculture. “I didn’t go break laws, never drank, smoked marijuana or anything,” he says. His favorite band was The Beach Boys, a clean-cut band of brothers who first broke big with 1963’s “Surfin’ Safari” album. It began a wave of Top 10 records for the crew led by visionary songwriter Brian Wilson.\*

Sonntag calls himself “an extremely average drummer.” Nevertheless, when he became state auditor he kept a drum kit in his office, along with a collection of baseball bats. They were conversation starters, he says, for the young students who visited the Capitol, and wouldn’t want to hear “stuffy lessons” about auditing.

Every once in a while, he’d be invited to sit at the drums for a few songs with a Tacoma oldies band, Daryl and the Diptones. He’d count off and pound out “Louie, Louie” or “Roll Over Beethoven.”



Willie Mays with Ben Cheney, owner of the minor league Tacoma Giants. Jack Sonntag, Sr. was Cheney’s guest for 1962 World Series games in San Francisco against the New York Yankees. *Tacoma Public Library, Richards Studio*

AT 16, HE TOOK HIS FIRST PLANE trip, in the tumultuous summer of 1968. California was conducting an election with new punch-card ballots, the first state on the West Coast to do so. Sonntag’s dad and other elections officials from Washington went down to observe the new technology. Brian tagged along.

It led to his version of heaven. He got to see the San Francisco Giants play in their old windswept home, Candlestick Park. Sonntag’s love affair with the Giants had started in the early 1960s when Tacoma became home to the club’s top minor-league team. Brian’s dad headed the booster club.

Sonntag’s devotion was animated by the Giants’ best player, Willie Mays. Average in size, Mays was extraordinary in all the game’s facets. He had

bashed more home runs, at the time of his retirement, than anyone but Babe Ruth and Henry Aaron. He sped around the basepaths, cutting corners like a Formula 1 driver, his cap flying off dramatically. Patrolling center field, he snared wicked drives with nonchalance, gunned down baserunners like a sniper, and made the greatest grab in World Series history, known decades later simply as “The Catch.”

And Mays seemed to do it all with a smile. “I’m not sure anybody could look happier playing a game as he always did,” Sonntag says.

\*The Beach Boys’ 1966 album “Pet Sounds,” inspired the Beatles’ classic, “Sgt. Pepper’s.” *Rolling Stone* magazine ranked them as the two greatest albums of all time.



Then, the kid from Tacoma was at Mays' playground and stage, chilly Candlestick, the foggy stadium jutting into San Francisco Bay. "I've heard about it. I've seen it on TV. And here I am. And you know, Willie Mays is out there, and it's just crazy."

The glorious pilgrimage would take a shocking turn on election night. Brian stayed in the hotel room, listening to the Giants on the radio, while his dad was out watching the ballot-counting unfold. Brian was in bed when his dad hurried into the room and snapped on the TV. "Hey Brian," he said, like always, but with more urgency. "You hear what's going on?"

Brian sat up. All night. Television newscasters who had signed off hurried back on the air. It was almost 4 a.m. in New York; two months after Martin Luther King, Jr., had been murdered.

Robert F. Kennedy, JFK's younger brother, was running for president. He had just won the June 4 California primary, a major victory. Kennedy spoke to giddy supporters, just after midnight, in a Los Angeles hotel. He flashed a peace sign before shaking some hands and leaving the stage. Then, as RFK moved through a hotel kitchen, he was shot in the head by a Palestinian immigrant, Sirhan Sirhan, who blamed RFK for supporting Israel. Kennedy survived for another 26 hours before he was pronounced dead.

Sonntag and his father took a cab to Oakland the next day. They were returning across the bay, when the cabbie, making conversation, said something about hoping RFK would die.

"I look at my dad," Sonntag recalls, "and all of a sudden he's beet red. And I'm picturing these hands grabbing this guy by the throat, and we're going to fly off the Oakland Bay Bridge right here.

"Then dad says, 'What do you mean by that?' In that baritone voice, 'What do you mean by that?' And the guy says, 'No, no, no, I mean I don't want him to be a vegetable for the rest of his life.'" His dad did not throttle the cabbie. But he cut the trip short a day, and returned to Washington crestfallen that another American prince had been felled.



In February 1968, Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers ended his 25-day hunger strike with Bobby Kennedy at his side. RFK launched his run for President six days later. *University of California, San Diego*



JACK SONNTAG, SENIOR, died the following year, at age 62, collapsing from a heart attack, as he entered a University of Washington football game. Brian was a senior in high school.

"It's funny," he recalls. "Right before my dad died, I was taking these two senior math classes. One was office machines, and the other was senior math. I told my dad I'm pretty sure I'm going to get an 'A' in these two classes. He bet me ten dollars. I did get 'A's' too. But I never got to collect."



Jean Sonntag, with Governor Booth Gardner in 1990, was the matriarch of one of the most prominent Democratic families in Pierce County. "She wore out another set of rosary beads," her son Brian said about his run for statewide office in 1992.  
*Brian Sonntag*

Jack Senior's death made the front page of the *Sunday News Tribune*. The Tacoma paper called it a "great loss to the people of Pierce County." He was "nationally known and had developed and improved the election system under which all Washington auditors and a good many on the West Coast operated."

His father didn't leave much in the way of financial security, Sonntag says. "Elected officials' salaries at that time had only started to increase a little bit. Didn't leave life insurance."

Jean Sonntag went back to work, becoming a recordkeeper for St. Joseph's Hospital and the University of Puget Sound. Sonntag described his mom as funny, opinionated, and, above all, loyal. "If you were her friend, you were her friend," he says. "And other things didn't get in the way."

NEARING GRADUATION from Wilson High School, Sonntag realized he didn't have the talent to make a career of baseball. He took some courses at Tacoma Community College and UPS, but never graduated from college.

While a UPS student—a term Sonntag says should be applied "loosely"—a lecture series brought to campus a couple skeptics on the official theory that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman in JFK's murder. "And my eyes must've been just huge," Sonntag recalls. "Because they were asking what I thought were pretty simple questions that had not been answered, at that time, or since. That got me into, I believe, government-watching, and open-the-doors-let-people-in."

From there, it was a short trip to Nixon-stoked distrust of power. “I’m a guy who took vacation days to stay home and watch the Watergate hearings,” Sonntag recalls of 1973’s televised U.S. Senate probe of the White House. “And I think that particular time, a lot of government-watching was born out of that.”

Sonntag is enough of an assassination buff that while he was at an auditors’ conference in Dallas, he and his wife took a guided tour of infamous landmarks, including Dealey Plaza, the Texas School Book Depository, and the grassy knoll.

He doubts Oswald acted alone. And he thinks it’s quite possible the government was complicit in covering up details of JFK’s assassination.

“We’ve all grown up looking in books and on TV or film, at the area, and I really didn’t get a good impression until I walked it,” he says. It seemed so small. And then he went into the Book Depository, which was turned into a museum. He stood at a sixth-floor window next to the opening from which Oswald fired. From that vantage he couldn’t believe how close the president’s limousine would’ve come before it slowed and turned left down Elm Street. “Oh my gosh,” he recalls. “I could’ve thrown a baseball and hit it.”

Instead, the fatal shot wasn’t fired until the limo had turned and traveled almost 100 yards down the road. “And that didn’t make any sense to me,” he says. “I don’t know who [fired the fatal shot] but I know it wasn’t Oswald, at least by himself.”

How did that contribute to his outlook and career?

“If our government—and I truly believe this—if they could be part of, if not carrying this out—which I’m not sure they aren’t—they’ve certainly been involved in covering up things. The fact that there are still 100,000 pages or more of material that have not been released—you know, my gosh, hiding what?”

SONNTAG’S FIRST POLITICAL job was on his brother Dick’s campaign for Tacoma City Council in 1971. At the age of 19, he was “quote-unquote” Dick’s campaign manager. Oldest brother Jack Junior stayed away from his father’s profession. He joined the Marines, then went into teaching, coaching football (his 1975 Foss High squad was state champions), and school administration.

Although Dick became active in local politics, he thought he lacked the proper temperament for office. He wasn’t polite enough like his father, or brother Brian. But looking at his father’s values, as a supporter of labor unions and civil rights, he believed important things could be accomplished.

After Dick stepped away from the City Council in 1977—term-limited by a law he had advocated—six organizations honored him for his contribution to civil

rights and social service.

“It taught me that government can and should make a difference,” Brian says. He also got “schooled” on the family’s open-government, serve-the-people doctrine. “My brother had a rather crude description one time for his role as a council member,” Brian recalls. “He said, ‘If the citizens in my district want peanut butter on their sidewalks, my only question should be: creamy or crunchy?’ ”

Brian worked as a deputy clerk in the Pierce County Courthouse. He handled court files and exhibits, waited on the counter, pulled records for people, including newspaper reporters.

After he advanced to probate clerk, an opening arose in 1978 when Don Perry, who had been the county clerk for 16 years, announced he wasn’t going to run again. Sonntag was 26 years old. With Dick’s urging and advice, Brian dove in. At night, he’d sequester himself in a bedroom and make cold calls to local Democratic activists, most of whom were at least a generation older. It was not easy. He would doorbell 20,000 homes.

“I don’t think people had ever been doorbelled by a county clerk candidate,” he recalls. But there he was, bright-eyed, with brochures in hand, politely asking for support. And people would say, “You’re running for what?”

One Sunday evening, Brian and Dick were out putting up signs. Brian would always knock on the door, and double-check with residents who had said he could post on their property.

At one house, Sonntag recalls the owner saying, “ ‘Yeah, it’s okay—as long as you’re not related to that Sonntag who was on the City Council and gave everything away to those poor and black people.’ So, I told her, ‘No, no, that’s not us.’ ”



Before Brian gave his first important campaign speech in 1978, brother Dick (above) took him out for pizza and beer to calm his nerves. “I would’ve taken it in an IV,” Brian later joked. *Tacoma News Tribune*



Dick wrote Brian’s first speeches and instructed him when to pause, for effect, and to count 1-2-3 before resuming. *Tacoma News Tribune*



As county clerk, young Sonntag was in charge of storing courtroom evidence including a western saddle and artificial leg, shown here with curator Glenn Campbell. *Tacoma News Tribune*

And then he turned to his brother, who was standing just out of earshot, holding a sign and a hammer, and said, “Yep, put it anywhere you want it there, George.”

When the two got back in the car, Dick said, “I’m sure there’s a good reason. But *why* did you call me ‘George?’ ”

Sonntag was elected to a countywide post at just 26, but he was already a bit cynical. Less than a month later, he saw on TV news that Pierce County Sheriff George V. Janovich was arrested in a supermarket parking lot for his role in an extortion racket.

In 1986, another scandal gave Sonntag an opportunity. County Auditor Dick Greco announced he wasn’t running again.\* Greco was charged with bribery in August 1986.

The next year he was convicted on nine counts and sent to prison. Brian Sonntag later would say of that period in Tacoma politics: “Two county auditors went to jail, and two [others] were Sonntags.”

ELECTIONS AND RECORD-KEEPING were the Pierce County Auditor’s chief duties. Financial auditing was not part of the portfolio; it was done by the county executive’s team. The auditor post was subject to a two-term limit. And with two years left on his tenure at Pierce County, Sonntag jumped at the challenge of running statewide in 1992. He wanted to show that he hadn’t lucked into winning his county elections.

It was shaping up as the historic “Year of the Woman” in American politics. In Washington, women would be chosen for the first time to statewide positions of U.S. Senator, attorney general, lands commissioner, and insurance commissioner. (Patty Murray, Christine Gregoire, Jennifer Belcher and Deborah Senn, respectively.)

The November race for state auditor pitted Sonntag, a Democrat, against neighboring Thurston County Auditor Sam Reed, a Republican. And who better to assess these two in the Year of the Woman than Adele Ferguson, the tough, wisecracking and pioneering columnist for the *Bremerton Sun*? (One sage politi-

\* The hulking Greco had been such a prodigious slugger in baseball’s minor leagues that he was called the “Babe Ruth of the bush leagues.”





Most newspapers endorsed Sam Reed in the 1992 state auditor's race. *The Seattle Times* did so to end decades-long control of the office by a “Democratic cabal.” Reed became a three-term Secretary of State. *Kitsap Newspaper Group*

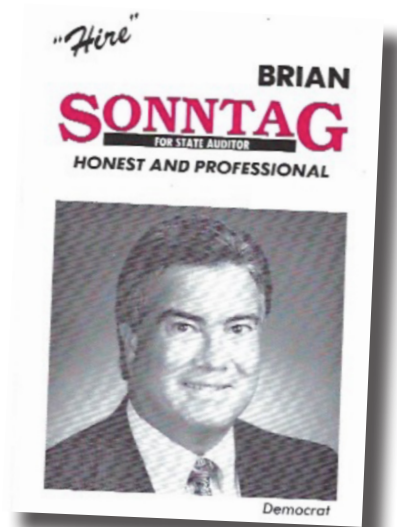
cal leader at the Capitol warned freshmen legislators about three things: “Adele Ferguson, Adele Ferguson, Adele Ferguson.”)

“Step right up, voters, and take a look at a race where you won’t be able to cop out on your responsibility by just blindly OK’ing the female of the species,” Ferguson wrote in October 1992. “We’re fortunate to have a couple of good men in the running, both county auditors now, Republican Sam Reed of Thurston, 51, and Democrat Brian Sonntag of Pierce, 39.”

Sonntag was the only candidate on the state level who survived a primary contest with a woman, Ferguson noted. In fact, he ran against two women, which probably saved his candidacy. Robin Hunt and Nina Becker together got 100,000 more votes than he did, but split the vote for women.

Both Reed and Sonntag favored the Legislature giving the State Auditor power to do “performance audits.” Such authority had been expressly prohibited by lawmakers, who only allowed reviews of whether agencies were spending money according to accepted accounting principles. The auditor was left not looking at how well government was performing—but at how legal they were performing.

Ferguson said the main difference between Sonntag and Reed appeared to be their party affiliations. The rivals carried on a spirited debate. Sonntag recalls one story he later told to a howling audience when Reed retired, after three terms as Secretary of State, in 2013. It began when Sonntag complained about Reed’s incessant radio ads that likened Sonntag to a clueless nobody. Sonntag told Reed that his children heard these putdowns. Others might believe the ads. And Reed should have a clear conscience about how he competed.



When sifting through boxes at his mother’s house, Sonntag discovered that his father had used the “hire me” theme his sons would adopt. *Brian Sonntag*

Oh, Brian, it's just politics, Reed responded, you know how it's played. Well, this conversation just proves one thing, Sam, Sonntag shot back: you're an asshole. Whoa, Reed countered, and you're a hothead.

Okay, Sonntag said, we're both right.

SONNTAG PUT 30,000 miles on a leased car while traversing the state. He noticed something unusual as he drove to any meeting that would offer a chance to shake hands with at least two voters: There was a groundswell of interest in government accountability.

In part, it had been inspired by Ross Perot, a quirky rich Texan with an excitable voice and jug-handle ears. In 1992, Perot launched an independent candidacy for President. He had a practical pitch. He liked to say he wanted to get under the hood of government and fix things. He called for a balanced budget and railed against the "giant sucking sound" of American jobs slipping away to other countries. Perot called his grassroots organization, United We Stand America.

"These were just citizens, who somebody organized a little bit, and motivated a little bit, and they started meeting," Sonntag recalls. "Well, they would have candidate forums with two and three hundred people. I mean, all over the place. And huge numbers."

Looking back, one might see seeds of the Tea Party and Trumpism at the gatherings. There was a strong distrust of politicians, a belief that special interests called the shots through campaign contributions, and faith in a glib business executive.

Sonntag beat Reed by almost 100,000 votes statewide, his victory sealed by large margins in Pierce and King counties. Perot got 24 percent of the vote for president, allowing Bill Clinton to win Washington state with just 43 percent on his way to the White House. Sonntag's goal was to transform the sleepy office, open it up, and get it to take X-rays of state agencies, even if it meant getting under their skin.

Pollster Stuart Elway believed the tax revolts that had sprung up, starting with California's Proposition 13 in 1978, were not driven mainly by people's tax burdens. They were instead more about accountability and a sense government wasn't spending wisely.



Sam Reed says his ads that Sonntag later joked about pointed out that Reed had financial auditing experience that Sonntag lacked. The two became long time friends.  
*Washington State Archives*

Sonntag's instinct was to tap those sentiments, not with calls to choke government, but rather to strengthen it by opening it up to performance audits. Citizens would feel empowered, he hoped, and public agencies would improve their practices. Although it may have sounded naïve or self-serving, those close to Sonntag said he was sincere.

But first, there was a cloud overhead created by his predecessor Bob Graham and his top lieutenant. In trying to help Sonntag get elected, Graham and assistant state auditor Jack Heinricher used an office computer message system and staff meetings to promote Sonntag, and arranged a reception at a Yakima hotel suite for state workers to meet the candidate. The problem was that Graham and Heinricher were using state time and funds for campaigning.

State Attorney General Ken Eikenberry, a Republican, had begun an investigation. When Christine Gregoire, a Democrat, was elected attorney general in 1992, she brought it to conclusion the following spring.

Sonntag was not faulted for any wrongdoing. He fired Heinricher, who said he had planned to retire anyway.



Brian didn't want to wed Jann Bemis until after the 1992 election because he thought she wouldn't want to marry a "loser." *Brian Sonntag*

Right after the election, Sonntag had gotten married. While county auditor, he hired Jann Bemis as his executive secretary. In time, the two divorcees began feeling the pull of romance. He told Jann that he could be her boss or her lover, but not both.

She chose love, and would tease him later about "firing" her.

It was the second marriage for each. At 19, Sonntag had wed a high-school girlfriend, with whom he had three sons. Jann had two boys from her previous marriage. The new blended household had five boys.

None of them went into politics. It would bring an end to a run in which Sonntags held city, county and state offices for 63 years.

SONNTAG KNEW that each of the 121 different taxing districts in Pierce County underwent financial audits. He read one of the audits. It was couched in what seemed a foreign language, "audit-ese," and focused, with exceeding precision, on whether agencies were complying with accounting standards. An instance where

an agency deviated was called a “finding.” And it was challenging to put a finding—which didn’t sound so bad—in context. Was it serious? Did it suggest a larger pattern? Did taxpayers get fleeced?

The audits were so opaque, they left Sonntag feeling that, “you don’t even know how to ask what you want to ask.”

He hired Jerry Pugnetti, a veteran reporter for *The News Tribune* in Tacoma, who had gone into public relations. Pugnetti and Sonntag decided they needed to get auditors to state their conclusions in plain English, the kind they’d use in talking to their own families.

Sonntag dispatched Pugnetti, with his pedigree in journalism (his parents were accomplished journalists), to 14 audit outposts around the state. His mission: persuade auditors to write in a more conversational style.

We have a problem, he thought, after a few meetings. He told his boss: “They talk the way they write.”

Sonntag and Pugnetti were aiming for more than friendlier prose. They knew the key to elevating the state auditor’s work was getting the media to amplify their revelations. The State Auditor had no power to sanction any one for wrongdoing. Their best outcome was to publicize their reports and hope the media applied pressure on agencies to reform. It required something like a partnership.

“Bob Graham referred to this office as the public’s window onto state and local government,” Sonntag, then 42, said of his predecessor. “But we have to make sure the window is open. We have an obligation and a duty to report to the public.”

Graham had mailed out his audit reports on Friday afternoons without fanfare or any strategy. “We were in the audit business, not the media business,” his top aide said.

But Sonntag did radio talk shows, gave three speeches a week, and deputized Pugnetti to herald the office’s work. Sonntag returned journalists’ calls. He didn’t pick fights. “He was helpful and that makes a difference, and he was very solicitous, knowing the importance of those relationships,” recalls Peter Callaghan, longtime political writer for *The News Tribune*.

*The Seattle Times* took notice. Just over a year after he was sworn in, it pub-



Sonntag was sworn in under Governor Mike Lowry in 1993. *Association of Washington Business*.



lished a front-page story with the headline: “High-profile auditor makes news in low-profile office.”

The actions of the state auditor were not much different from those in the past, except in one respect; they were getting a lot more attention, according to reporter David Schaefer. “Instead of audit reports just landing at a newspaper office once a week, they are now directed to a particular reporter or editor, with a cover sheet spelling out the most newsworthy findings,” Schaefer wrote.

“It’s the climate of the times,” said House Speaker Brian Ebersole, also from Tacoma. “Every TV network has a major series going about government waste.”

There seemed to be no sacred cows. A socialite active in Democratic Party fundraising ripped off the state Liquor Control Board for almost \$800,000 in a billing scam. A publicly-financed parking garage at an upscale Spokane shopping center lacked bank statements for 27 months, as well as meeting minutes, and cancelled checks. A UW medical-school employee stole more than \$4,000 over the course of four years.

Sonntag kept pushing for performance audits. “This office has such potential,” he said. He didn’t fret about any damage he was doing to government—or his own ambitions. “I could go home and lose sleep because I’m the government bad guy, but I look at my work as being so constructive.”

BUT HE WASN’T GAINING real traction on performance audits. Sonntag would get lip service from lawmakers that they were a swell idea. “Then, if there was a bill, it wouldn’t get up for a hearing,” he recalls. “Or, it might have hearings but then it would die someplace else. If they want to kill something, they’ll kill it.”

Around this time, Sonntag and his inner circle were feeling frustrated. One night, he and his wife, Jann, were watching “The West Wing” on TV. The episode, first aired in April 2000, centered on how fictional President Jed Bartlett’s agenda had been stalled in Congress by politics and Bartlett’s aversion to throwing elbows. Finally, Bartlett’s chief of staff challenged the president’s reticence, urging him to let his staff “off the leash,” and “let Bartlett be Bartlett.”

Jann immediately got it. “Let Brian be Brian,” she said. Jerry Pugnetti, who became a friend and close adviser, had the same thought as he watched the show. When Sonntag got to his office the next day, he found a note Pugnetti left on his chair, scrawled, “Let Sonntag be Sonntag.”

Looking at the baseball bats in his office, he decided, “Why not us?” Let auditors be auditors. And have them go where they thought there might be the most risk to taxpayers. It was a new concept in financial auditing at the time. Sonntag’s

auditors would focus, for instance, on cash handling and collection points, such as ferry system fare booths. They helped ensure that agencies had safeguards in place, such as having two people reconcile cash drawers at the end of the day. “It



Sonntag introduced an approach to his office's audits that focused on particularly vulnerable areas such as cash-handling and collection points.  
*Tacoma News Tribune*

was intentional on our part to say ‘follow the money,’ ” Sonntag says. The practice was adopted as formal policy by auditors around the country.

Meanwhile, Mark Miloscia, a Democratic state representative, was crusading for performance audits. A former pilot who quit the Air Force for religious reasons, Miloscia made the audits his mission. Darting around the Capitol, he reminded Sonntag of a buzzing fly or a spinning top. Two years in a row, Miloscia's legislation sailed through the House, but died in the Senate.

Finally, in 2005, Miloscia had a bill that was likely to win approval in both chambers of a Democrat-controlled Legislature. Sonntag called it a “good bill” and said, “I support it.”

Lawmakers had added incentive to consider performance audits this time. Tim Eyman, a Mukilteo watch-salesman on his way to becoming Washington's most prolific and reviled initiative-hawker, had glommed on to a good idea.

AFTER THE 1999 SUCCESS of his Initiative 695, which gutted the state's vehicle excise tax, Eyman became a perennial one-man political circus.\* He pulled stunts to promote his causes. He gave good quotes. Government was always the villain. He owned the libs, before that was a thing. Microphone in hand, he could work a crowd. He was what TV wrestlers call a “good stickman.”

Surveying the 2005 political landscape, Eyman heard the buzz about Miloscia's bill. He came up with a competing measure, Initiative 900, arguing that Miloscia's approach took just a “baby step toward the general direction of accountability.”

He began gathering signatures for his own I-900. Both Miloscia and Sonntag said Eyman's proposal went too far and would result in stacks of unneeded audits.

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\* Eyman's I-695 also required voter approval of all new local and state taxes. The Washington Supreme Court held that it was unconstitutional. But Governor Gary Locke and the Legislature kept in place Eyman's flat \$30 car tabs.

Miloscia also said Eyman was wrong to insist that embarrassing public officials should be the goal.

Eyman replied, in effect, by pounding his chest. He labeled his I-900, the “900-pound gorilla.” He wore a simian costume for photo ops. He asked Sonntag to don the monkey suit for a rally. Forget it, Sonntag said, I’m not joining your circus. He tried to keep Eyman at arm’s length.

Journalists parsed the differences between the dueling performance-audit pitches. Eyman would allow Sonntag to examine local agencies, such as school districts; he would let Sonntag decide what to audit; and I-900 would dedicate \$12 million a year in sales-tax revenues to performance audits. Miloscia, on the other hand, would limit audits to state agencies; would have a citizen panel appointed by politicians recommend targets; and would rely on state lawmakers for funding.

Eyman seemed to have the upper hand with opinion-writers. He had come up with something, for once, they could abide.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” opined columnist Danny Westneat in *The Seattle Times*. “Even a blind squirrel finds a nut occasionally.”

*The Times’* editorial board had never endorsed an Eyman initiative, but there was a first time for everything. Sonntag had long sought the tool Eyman was selling. “Let him do it,” *The Times* said.

Eyman said he found all the mainstream acceptance “creepy.”\*

THE TASK FOR Sonntag’s team was to “de-layer” the language of Eyman’s measure. What exactly did it specify? “It doesn’t say we’re going to look at the three or ten largest agencies,” Sonntag recalls. “So, where can we be most effective? That became the largest, and best challenge for us—to determine where we could be most effective.”

Anonymous tipsters helped.

Mic Dinsmore, a barrel-chested Mike Ditka lookalike, was the Port of Seattle’s chief executive. Dinsmore was getting the Port’s third runway finally built,



Tim Eyman dubbed his Initiative 900 a “900-pound gorilla.” It gave Washington one of the nation’s most far-reaching performance-audit laws. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

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\* In February 2021, a Superior Court judge fined Eyman \$2.6 million for “egregious” violations of campaign-finance laws. Attorney General Bob Ferguson had charged Eyman with laundering political donations to enrich himself and taking kickbacks from a signature-gathering firm.



Besides drums and baseball bats, Sonntag's office décor included a Three Stooges poster and a portrait of JFK and RFK together in a solemn moment. *Brian Sonntag*

and he was trying to overcome its loss in cargo to Tacoma. He “ruled with an iron hand” and “an arrogant disregard for open government.”

Still, Dinsmore stayed out of the crosshairs of investigative snoopers, until a “blue-green” coalition of labor and environmentalists got two of its candidates elected to the Port’s five-member commission. The part-time commissioners, then paid \$6,000 a year, were supposed to act as the public overseers of a vast commercial enterprise. One of the new commissioners in 2003, Alec Fiske, was a Yale-educated former journalist with a “banker’s gimlet eye for balance sheets.”

Reporters began teasing details out of the Port’s headquarters about Dinsmore’s pay, perks, and peccadillos, with the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* leading the way. The biggest jolt came in April 2007. Dinsmore was going to leave his corner office at the Port to become a hedge-fund executive—and he was departing with a sweet deal that a majority of commissioners said they had never seen. It had been memorialized by Dinsmore and one commissioner, his stalwart ally, Patricia Davis. After a flurry of news stories, Dinsmore said he would not seek the \$260,000 severance package.

By then, Sonntag’s auditors had already started digging. The Port’s third runway fit their criteria: large, risky, with opportunities for mischief in contracting.

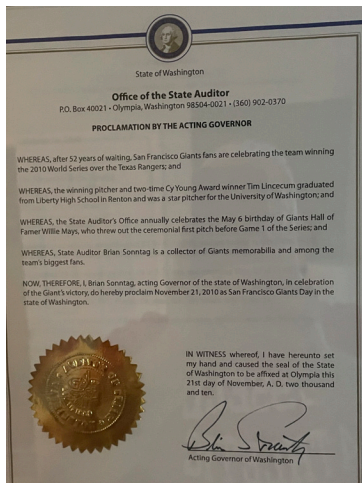
The Port’s response to Sonntag’s poking reinforced his instincts. Port executives were friendly and gladhanding, but would not deliver promised documents. “A lot of good car salesmen,” Sonntag recalls. They told Sonntag his team was not



conversant in the complexity of the Port’s work. To counter this line of defense, he contracted with two national firms that specialized in auditing ports.

On December 20, 2007, Sonntag delivered an early present to the media. He dropped a 334-page report about the Port’s construction management.

While especially dense in detail, it led with a feature that had been devised by Mindy Chambers, Sonntag’s communications director. A former newspaper reporter, Chambers created an “executive summary” for most audits, making them more quickly digestible for reporters on deadline. The Port audit featured six bullet-point, one-sentence “major findings.” The last of the them said the Port’s lax practices were “vulnerable to fraud, waste and abuse.” That statement would be quoted again and again.



When Sonntag briefly became acting governor in 2010, he took the opportunity to proclaim a statewide “San Francisco Giants Day,” after his favorite team won the World Series.  
*Brian Sonntag*

Dipping deeper, *The Seattle Times* explained the way Dinsmore’s “get-it-done” culture worked—and violated contracting procedure. Three local construction companies had formed a partnership, TTI (short for “The Three Italians”), to bid on delivering dirt to build a 130-foot-tall embankment for the third runway.

The problem for Dinsmore was that TTI’s bid was \$9 million over the Port’s estimated cost for the project. That would trigger a closer look by Fiskien, the prying commissioner, and others. And, no doubt, more process.

At a steakhouse near the airport, known for its dark wood and dry martinis, Dinsmore met with one of the TTI principals, Gary Merlino. Afterwards, Merlino would lower his bid enough to avoid setting off alarms at the commission. The Port would make it up to him later. For instance, Merlino estimated fuel costs at \$2 per gallon; they ended up being \$3 a gallon. Contractors got back the \$4 million difference through change orders the commission didn’t examine. Auditors found no evidence that any economic experts had predicted \$2 per gallon prices.

Most of the ways that Merlino had lowered his bid turned out to be “cosmetic,” according to Sonntag’s auditors. In the end, TTI got the \$124 million it had initially bid.

OUTRAGE ENSUED. Port commissioners and new CEO Tay Yoshitani vowed to make swift reforms. The Port would cease informal ways of resolving disagreements with contractors, known as “tummy rubs.” The audit quoted one case in which a Port construction manager wrote a contractor: “let’s figure that out [project cost] via tummy rub in lieu of you all documenting what is undocumented.”

Port commissioners also hired Mike McKay, the former U.S. Attorney for Western Washington, to investigate for fraud. McKay’s report found a kettle of shaky practices, such as Port personnel breaking large-dollar contracts into pieces to avoid competitive bidding, and awarding no-bid contracts that were repeatedly amended to increase their value. But McKay did not find evidence of embezzling or personal gain that would constitute a crime; nor did federal prosecutors who investigated the Port.

Two Port managers resigned to avoid being fired. One of them, third-runway manager John Rothnie, said he was “smeared” and a fall guy.\* Yoshitani disciplined seven other high-ranking managers. Four were suspended for at least a week without pay. Three others, including the airport director, the Port’s top lawyer, and its deputy director, received letters of reprimand.

THE SUBJECTIVE NATURE of performance audits invited detractors. Sonntag reported in late 2007 that the state Department of Transportation should focus on relieving road congestion by building more highway lanes. Mark Hallenbeck, director of the Washington State Transportation Center at the University of Washington, called the audit a “waste of money.” Sonntag’s findings weren’t new, and because such decisions were generally made by the Legislature, Hallenbeck asked, “How is that an auditable process?”

Sonntag also reviewed Sound Transit, a favorite punching bag for conservatives. He identified \$5 million in unnecessary expenses in the agency’s first light-rail project, budgeted at \$2.6 billion. He also noted that while Sound Transit had



One of Sonntag’s heroes, John Wooden was a soft-spoken UCLA basketball coach with unparalleled success. Wooden’s sayings included: be true to yourself; respect every opponent; be more interested in character than reputation. *University of California, Los Angeles*

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\* Rothnie said he met with TTI owner Merlino because he was directed to by Dinsmore. When he went to Merlino’s office, he said the contractor gave him a remnant from a meeting with Dinsmore. It was a napkin with a dollar figure on it, along with Dinsmore’s cell phone number.

lacked procedures for tasks such as land acquisition, it had “extensively improved since 2002.”

Facing a shortfall in 2009, lawmakers slashed the auditor’s office budget. Sonntag publicly described the money grab as a “sucker punch” and “ridiculous.” Newspaper editorials took his side. He compared auditing to baseball. “It’s a fair game. There’s no clock. You can’t spread the floor and run four corners and run the clock out. Everybody is going to get their three outs, every inning, for nine innings,” he said.

He said lawmakers weren’t playing fair. They weren’t going to balance the state’s huge budget by cutting \$10 million from his. He wondered aloud if the real problem was that he was too outspoken, or popular, or something else.

In reply, lawmakers, such as House Majority Leader Lynn Kessler, a Democrat from Hoquiam, said he hadn’t used all the money that had been appropriated to his office. What’s more, some wondered if the performance audits were even saving money. “That’s one of the criticisms we had,” said Rep. Kelli Linville, a Bellingham Democrat, who headed the House Ways and Means Committee.

Sonntag was particularly livid about a budget provision that said if he could prove his audits saved money then the Legislature would give back some of what it planned to take away. He called it a “bounty” system. It violated auditing standards, posed a direct conflict of interest, and was “stupid.”

Anti-tax activist Eyman jumped in, saying lawmakers were attacking Sonntag because they didn’t like his finger-pointing.

People were already complaining he was in cahoots with Eyman; Sonntag didn’t need the showman’s support.

One left-wing blogger, David “Goldy” Goldstein, had testified in support of performance audits several years earlier. But in 2007, he was suspicious. Goldstein worried about “rumors and hints that the anti-transit crowd has been leaked information” about upcoming reports. He said Sonntag’s audits “served to enable and embolden anti-transit, anti-tax, anti-government activists.”

He wrote that Sonntag had become “Tim Eyman’s bitch.”

Sonntag imagined meeting Goldy for coffee one day. When the blogger asked him why he had put an empty jar on the table, Sonntag’s fantasy reply would be, “because you need something to carry your teeth in.”

CRITICISM FROM THE LEFT grew after Sonntag endorsed former TV news anchor Susan Hutchison, a political novice, for King County Executive. The position is nonpartisan, but Hutchison refused to acknowledge her alliance to Republi-

cans, through her contributions to candidates such as Mike Huckabee, or answer questions about her stance on abortion rights.

Hutchison lost the 2009 election to Dow Constantine, and later became head of the state Republican Party, and an ardent supporter of Donald Trump. She even excused Trump's "Access Hollywood" comments about grabbing women's genitalia. "Sometimes you do things purely out of friendship," Sonntag said in 2021. "And that's what that was. I had gotten to be friends with her and her husband Andy, separate and apart from politics."

Still, it chafed at Democrats, as did Sonntag's 2012 endorsement of Republican Rob McKenna for governor. And when Sonntag joined the conservative Freedom Foundation the next year, as a "senior fellow for government accountability," he was all but cast from the Democratic Party by its combative state chairman, Dwight Pelz.\*

"First off, it is Dwight," Sonntag says about the flap. "He shoots from the lip like a lot of people we may not care for."

Sonntag says he backed McKenna because they worked well together on open government issues when McKenna was the state attorney general. "And I think he's a good guy. He's smart, and would've been a good governor." He points back to his mother's stout loyalty to friends. "Party mattered least to me," he says, "if we're talking about friends, or another strong connection."



When Sonntag considered a run for governor in 2012, Congressman Jay Inslee, an early frontrunner, called to say his campaign was "locked and loaded." Sonntag endorsed his friend Rob McKenna, a Republican, which irked some Democrats. *Associated Press*

WITH HIS STATURE as one of the most popular office-holders in Washington, Sonntag considered running for governor in 2012, after Chris Gregoire said she wouldn't seek a third term.

Sonntag decided not only to take a pass on running for governor, he stunned some by not even seeking a sixth term as state auditor.

Looking back, Sonntag quotes former baseball executive, Buzzy Bavasi, who said he'd rather trade a player a year early, than a year too late.

\* Chairman Pelz was affectionately called "our asshole" by Goldy, then writing for *The Stranger* newspaper in Seattle.



"And I translated that into this decision," he says. "I'd rather do this a year or two years early than two years too late. I would not be giving the citizens of the state what they hired me for, if that was the case. And you don't know that until you're in the middle of it. I might have had four great years, but I might have had one. And then it's just not right."

There was another factor. His mentor, his brother Dick, died in June 2009 from esophageal cancer. He was 66.

Dick's death figured in his decision not to run again. "It did. Oh boy," Sonntag says. "Whether it was the driving force, I don't know. I could run and win without him. But I don't know, the fun was gone."

He felt 20 years was enough. He had gone the distance, to borrow a line from the first "Rocky" movie, and his favorite fictional character. He didn't want to overstay his welcome like Sylvester Stallone who had starred in five Rocky Balboa sequels, at that point. "I think people who stay too long lose their edge, lose their effectiveness, and I didn't want to be that guy," he recalls.

And he didn't think his success as an auditor would have transferred to running for governor. Auditor was a "perfect" fit for his values. Governor was a more partisan position, "and I don't think I was cut out for that," he says. Candidates for governor, "more and more every day, lead with ideology," he says. "And, that wasn't me."

AFTER HE QUIT politics, he went from the halls of Olympia to the streets of Tacoma. A friend, who headed the Tacoma Rescue Mission, a century-old organization serving the hungry and homeless, was offered a job in California he couldn't refuse. Sonntag had just been hired as chief financial officer of the faith-based nonprofit where his wife Jann worked. He became its interim director.

Again, he couldn't abide a perceived conflict-of-interest with Jann. "I told her, 'I'm not going to fire you. We're just not going to pay you anymore.' She could be a volunteer," he explains.

"He fired me twice," Jann shouts, laughing off-camera while her husband was being interviewed on Zoom.

And Sonntag's "interim" title wound up lasting two years. "It took them that long to find somebody. But, at the same time, it was a very rewarding two years. We did change the color of the ink from red to black. I was really proud of that. We kept serving a thousand meals a day. We had a very successful drug and alcohol recovery program, and just did some good work. Kind of a nice transition for me, from government to the real world."

As for what to do about the state's homeless people, not surprisingly the citizen-first auditor says he'd begin by getting their viewpoint.



When Sonntag started at the Tacoma Rescue Mission, his wife Jann, a paralegal for 35 years, was already employed there. To avoid a conflict-of-interest, he said she should become a volunteer. *Brian Sonntag*

of them either. We've got to tell them, 'You can't just camp here. We can't do that. So, what would your next option be?' "

"We keep telling them, we being society, we're pretty sure what they want. But that might not be right. If mental health is the driver for some number, and alcohol or drug addiction might be the driver for others, well, we're acknowledging then, that they're not all the same, can't treat them all the same. The folks who are homeless because of the Covid era, lost a job, might be looking at something temporary—you hope. But until that temporary gets resolved, they're out there. It's a mix."

He continues down a familiar path.

"It seems like everything I say circles back to listening to citizens. But I think that's the right start. I'd get a group and go down to People's Park, and go talk to some folks. And some are going to be absolutely happy where they are, and doing what they're doing. But that's not all

THE AUDITOR'S OFFICE LOST some of its luster after Sonntag left. He was succeeded by Troy Kelley, a Democratic state representative from Tacoma. A former colleague described the teetotaling veteran as a "walking pocket protector." Kelley pumped almost \$500,000 of his own money into his campaign for auditor and vastly outspent rivals.

But troubling signs surfaced before the election. One opponent, Republican James Watkins, tried to sound an alarm when Kelley featured a complimentary quote from Sonntag in TV ads and the statewide Voters Pamphlet. The quote clearly implied Sonntag's endorsement. But it was actually from 2010 when Kelley sought a House seat, and the former Army lawyer seemed to fit that swing district on the edge of Joint Base Lewis McChord.

Sonntag had avoided endorsing a candidate in the 2012 auditor's race. And he says he complained to Kelley's campaign about the TV ads highlighting his quote. "I did not like how they were using it, and confusing it," he recalls, although he

didn’t “want to be a jerk” and file a formal objection.

Two years after Kelley took office, he was indicted by federal prosecutors for crimes related to mortgage fraud. Through a real-estate services company he ran, Kelley kept over \$1 million in escrow payments owed to clients, the feds said.

Less than a month later Sonntag called for Kelley—who had taken an indefinite leave of absence—to be impeached. Others, such as Governor Jay Inslee urged Kelley to resign, but stopped there, waiting for due process to run its course. Sonntag thought Kelley’s absence was reason enough to remove him from office. His rationale: if you’re elected, it’s a 24-7 job; there’s no provision for taking leave.

Kelley was found guilty of eight felonies, including possession of stolen property and tax fraud. After exhausting his appeals, he began serving a one-year prison sentence in July 2021.

In the meantime, Pat McCarthy, a former Pierce County auditor, was elected to succeed Kelley in 2016. McCarthy and her team were back on the Port of Seattle’s case the following year. The Port’s elected commissioners approved a plan to increase the public agency’s work-week from 37.5 hours to 40 hours. With it, came a total of \$4.7 million in one-time bonus payments to non-union employees.

Bonuses even went to Port bigwigs. Already drawing a salary of \$350,000, CEO Ted Fick was to receive another \$24,500. For working 40 hours a week.

McCarthy concluded the payments amounted to illegal gifts because they were not tied to performance. Fick, the CEO, resigned under pressure. Other top executives refunded their payments. And the Port’s image was back in the muck.

McCarthy has produced other high-profile audits, such as one that discovered \$6.9 million embezzled from the Pierce County Housing Authority. And she has taken innovative approaches. A “first-of-its-kind” audit in 2021 used methods of “applied cultural anthropology” to survey and interview hundreds of employees about whether sexual harassment was widespread at the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. (It wasn’t, McCarthy’s survey concluded, although it did find evidence of other unprofessional behaviors.)

SONNTAG FELT STUNG by Kelley’s “huge smudge on the integrity” of the auditor’s office. Yet he believes his own 20-year run, and its colonoscopies of the body politic, did reshape the auditor’s office and its role. “I think for the longest time it didn’t seem that people in Olympia could even spell ‘accountability.’ ”

And, he says, it’s the auditor’s constitutional duty to act as a check on state government. Washington’s founders didn’t trust government very much. They created statewide elected positions—such as auditor, treasurer, and insurance

commissioner—to act independently from one another. And from the governor. They didn’t want their government to fall under the sway of railroads or other power brokers.

“I think the founders were a bunch of populists,” he says. “We work directly for the people of the state. Well, that sets up an environment where, if I’m clear on who I work for, and if I’m clear on who I should be reporting our work to, that’s people outside the Capitol building. That’s the people who pay the freight and are demanding openness and accessibility.”

His style was more in-your-face than some preferred. But John Ladenburg, a friend and former Pierce County prosecutor, said: “It’s no use having a watchdog who doesn’t bark.”



As for his legacy, Sonntag says: “I think it’s the citizen-centric approach to connect with people, because they aren’t going to sit around the dinner table and talk about the auditor. But they knew there was someone looking out for how the public’s money was used.” *Tacoma News Tribune*

SONNTAG DIDN’T WANT to be “permanent” at anything except “retired.” But he ran into an old friend who invited him to try umpiring ballgames.

Nah, Sonntag said, at first.

“I’m 61 years old at the time, and no, as much grief as I gave umpires, I shouldn’t do that.” But he thought about it more, ran into his friend again, and said he wanted to give it a try.

He went to a meeting thinking it would be about umpiring boys’ baseball, but it was for girls’ fast-pitch softball. He gave it a shot.

The big difference between the boys’ and girls’ games?

“I think the biggest element missing in the girls’ game, and thankfully so, is testosterone. They get upset, or they might not like a call, but it’s a lot different.”

How different?

In one of the first games he umpired, a batter came to the plate to lead off an inning. She dug into the batter’s box, and looked ready to go. Sonntag signaled to the pitcher, “Play ball!”

Time-out, time-out, pleaded the batter.

“And she bends down,” he recalls, “and picks up a butterfly that was right behind home plate. And she goes over to the screen and lets it go. And I remarked





Sonntag's advice for throwing out a ceremonial first pitch: walk to your spot, don't look around in awe, or hesitate; just fire away at your target. *Brian Sonntag*

to myself right then, that is not something I would see in a boys' game. Would not see that.”

Sonntag became president of the Western Washington Umpires Association. Prostate cancer sidelined him for one season; Covid for another. In the fall of 2021, Sonntag had back surgery in hopes it would allow him to stand for hours again. Then, he expects to be back, calling the action, fair and foul, with the mix of purpose and satisfaction that “let Sonntag be Sonntag.”

Bob Young  
Legacy Washington

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