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Why did Mazzei insist on removing media from his OCPAC appearance? | Opinion



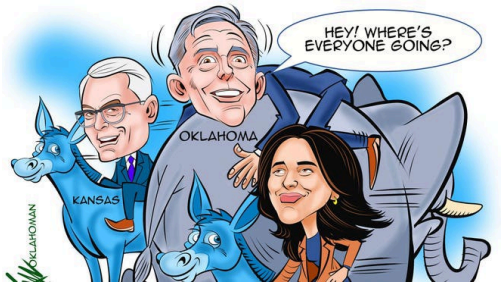
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The Oklahoman
Nov. 6, 2026, 8:55 a.m. CT

One of Gov.-elect Mike Mazzei's first actions the day after the election was to pay a visit to a very conservative, Christian organization called the Original Constitutional Principles Affecting Culture organization, or OCPAC for short.

Whatever Mazzei had to say to this group was something he didn't want to say in public. Members of the media attending an OCPAC luncheon billed as "Mike & Noel Mazzei — First OKC Post-Election Appearance" were directed to leave.

OCPAC members said ejecting the media wasn't their idea. It was a stipulation of the governor's team.

As a member of the media whose job it is to report what public officials say and do, I hope this isn't setting a precedent.



e generally have a cordial relationship with OCPAC leaders Bob Linn and outgoing state Sen. Shane Jett, R-Shawnee. They regularly open their meetings to us and the media. But we sharply disagree with their frequent messaging promoting Christian nationalism, Islamophobia and anti-LGBTQ rights.

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Which makes it all the more troubling that our new governor-elect would insist that the media be removed from one of his first public addresses.

Until it was time for Mazzei's remarks, the OCPAC gathering was a relaxed and congenial gathering of people who mostly knew one another and liked to sing: "God Bless America" (once) and "Oklahoma!" (twice).

Linn and Jett shared details about their trips to Israel and Canada, respectively, and made observations about the election.

Linn said he thought Mazzei would make better choices for membership on the boards of regents that govern state colleges and universities.

"It's not the place to put your friends. It's not the place to put the richest people you know. It's a place to put people who understand Western Civilization ... and where we should be headed as a nation,

not people who just know what our rank is nationally in terms of NCAA football," Linn said.

Jett, who was a strong supporter of former state schools Superintendent Ryan Walters and his effort to put Bibles into public school classrooms, praised Mazzei as someone "respected by President Trump ... a governor-elect who is conservative at his core, a family man and a person of extraordinary integrity."



During his campaign, Mazzei acknowledged the need for improvement in the state's lagging public school system, but stayed away from Walters' controversial initiatives involving Bibles and greater emphasis on Christian principles. He talked more about preparing students for the workforce and improving academic accountability and outcomes.

In their remarks, both Linn and Jett mentioned Arabs and Muslims in negative terms. Linn was talking about the ruins of Christian temples he had seen in Israel that had been destroyed in conflicts between Arabs and Jewish people many years ago. Jett talked about the large number of Muslims he had seen in Canada and how they were "pushing, pushing and pushing to control the government."

During his campaign, at a gubernatorial debate Aug. 3, Mazzei promised to ban sharia law and designate the Muslim Brotherhood and Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Muslim advocacy group, as terrorist organizations. And late in his race against Democratic candidate Cyndi Munson, his campaign team released an ad that was criticized by an Oklahoma City Islamic imam for attempting to show Munson in a negative light because of her visit to a mosque. A narrator on the ad made the assertion that Munson backed a terrorist group associated with Hamas.

Hours after Mazzei's appearance, Linn shared a video with The Oklahoman that he said was unedited footage of the governor-elect's remarks. Both Mazzei and his wife, Noel, spoke and thanked the group for its support. Mazzei talked about his struggle recovering from an automobile accident and the inspiration he found reading the Apostle Paul's encouragement to the Galatians in the Bible.

But Mazzei also said this, talking about how Oklahoma resisted the "blue wave" of Democratic victories in the midterm election:

"Thanks to you," he told the OCPAC group, "we can be a beacon of life to patriotic Americans that want to come to somewhere where we're gonna have lower taxes. And we're gonna respect individual freedom. And we're going to welcome others that believe in being good to one another and that love Christian biblical values."

Going forward, Gov.-elect Mazzei needs to make it clear that he also will welcome those who believe in being good to one another because of their own values, perhaps drawn from Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and other religions, the spirituality of Indigenous people and many, many other sources.

OCPAC is a group that recently endorsed an article by a Washington Times columnist, Everett Piper screaming in big, bold letters: MULTICULTURALISM IS THE DISEASE, NOT THE CURE.

Multiculturalism, in truth, is not a disease. Far from it. Ask the members of Oklahoma's 39 tribal nations. Ask people in the communities of Vietnamese, Afghans, Latinos, Lebanese, people from the Marshall Islands and others who make their homes here.

Multiculturalism is integral to Oklahoma, a strength to be appreciated and encouraged. This is something our new governor should endorse throughout the state in public.

Governors can and should have lots of private discussions with lots of people. It goes with the job. But to hold a special, private meeting with a group like OCPAC sends a message that is not a message of incluson.

And any meeting announced publicly and then held behind closed doors invites uncertainty, speculation and concern. That's a mistake from a newly elected governor who has served long enough in public life to know better. We wish him the best in his new duties, and hope he will stick to the promise he made at a later news conference that day — which was open to the media — to be a governor for all Oklahomans.



William C. Wertz is the Oklahoman's Opinion Editor. The viewpoint expressed in this column is his own, and not necessarily that of this publication. If you have a comment on what he's written or a suggestion for a future topic or someone he should talk to, his address is wwertz@oklahoman.com.

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