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OUR VIEW

Distracted driving a serious crime

A law that goes into effect on Sunday will increase the penalty for distracted driving in Oregon and broaden the definition of what "distracted" means.

The upgraded punishments reflect the ever-increasing danger of controlling a speeding vehicle while also operating an array of digital devices, which is making our roads as dangerous as they have been in decades.

Using a hand-held device while behind the wheel will soon cost you $260 to $1,000 for your first offense, $435 to $2,000 for your second and up to six months in jail for your third. And that's not just talking or texting. Any momentary glance, while in motion or at rest in the roadway, is eligible.

And it could cost you even more than that — a serious injury, an expensive fix, a fatal accident. More than 3,100 people die every year in cellphone-related crashes, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It's a serious public health threat, though not significantly different from ones we have faced before.

Drinking and driving, in the days before the dangers of such action were known, was laughed about or even admired as a rite of passage. But as fatalities mounted and innocent victims demanded to be heard, a nationwide public outcry called out for action. Advertising campaigns broadcast the danger of drinking and driving, law enforcement agencies committed resources to catching lawbreakers, and the justice system upped the penalties for those convicted of engaging in illegal conduct.

And although drinking and driving remains an issue, you would be hard-pressed to find any American who doesn't know that it is a dangerous, illegal act that carries with it serious consequences.

That must now be the case with distracted driving as well. Until the not-too-far future when our cars are driving themselves, people are going to be bombarded with more gadgets and gizmos that do not play nice with operating a large piece of machinery traveling fast and carrying our loved ones. Not taking that responsibility seriously must be a serious crime.

State must clarify tax rules on recreational pot

Oregon's rules on disclosure of tax collections on recreational marijuana sales are blurry and need refining.

As they are now, the disclosure rules put cities, including those on the North Coast and others in rural areas, in an awkward position because the state's rules on what can and can't be disclosed create a conflict with local budget requirements to publicly account for all incoming money.

Most cities that passed marijuana taxes signed agreements with the state Department of Revenue for collection. Usually when the state reports on tax collections and other economic data there are regional and city-by-city breakdowns. As a result, the state required confidentiality agreements with the cities to ensure information about tax returns from individual businesses is protected so the data couldn't be used by anyone to gain a competitive edge.

In regions where there are only a few pot shops, individual business information could be discerned from public documents if a city accurately accounts for that money in its financial statements or annual budget. To stay within the rules, cities have taken different approaches. In Astoria, for instance, the city didn't include revenue projections for pot dollars in its budget for the fiscal year. As we reported Friday, only City Finance Director Susan Brooks knows how much has come in and resides in the city's accounts.

Taxpayers should know that when viewing a city's financial statement or budget that all the money is accounted for, and right now the rules prevent that.

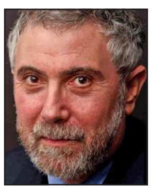
Developing clear rules for the budding growth of marijuana sales has been a work in progress since voters approved recreational sales. The state Department of Justice is expected to issue a legal opinion on the tax collections and disclosure rules, and it must to clear up the conflicts.

The type of secrecy and nondisclosure caused by the confidentiality agreements and their interpretation isn't in the public interest. Taxpayers should know that when viewing a city's financial statement or budget that all the money is accounted for, and right now the rules prevent that.

It must change.

Trapped by their own lies

By PAUL KRUGMAN
New York Times News Service



On Saturday pretty much the entire medical sector — groups representing doctors, hospitals and insurers — released an extraordinary open letter condemning the Graham-Cassidy health bill. The letter was written in the style of Emile Zola's "J'accuse": a series of paragraphs, each beginning with the bolded words "We agree," pointing out the bill's many awful features, from the harm it would do to people with pre-existing conditions to the chaos it would cause in insurance markets.

It takes a truly terrible proposal to elicit such eloquent unanimity from organizations that are usually cautious to the point of stodginess. So how did Republicans come up with something that bad, and how did that bad thing get so close to becoming law? Indeed, it still has a chance of being enacted despite John McCain's "no."

The answer is that Republicans have spent years routinely lying for the sake of political advantage. And now — not just on health care, but across the board — they are trapped by their own lies, forced into trying to enact policies they know won't work.

AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

A protester opposed to the GOP's Graham-Cassidy health care repeal bill is removed by U.S. Capitol Police Monday after disrupting a Senate Finance Committee hearing on the last-ditch GOP push to overhaul the nation's health care system.

Reporting on why the GOP plowed ahead with Graham-Cassidy makes it clear that many Republicans supporting it are well aware that it's a bad bill, although they may not appreciate just how bad. "You know, I could maybe give you 10 reasons why this bill shouldn't be considered," said U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa. "But," he continued, "Republicans have campaigned on this," meaning repeal-and-replace, and had to fulfill their promise.

Carl Hulse of The New York Times adds more detail: One big factor behind the push for Graham-Cassidy was anger among big donors, who wanted to know why Republicans had broken their vows to kill Obamacare.

But repealing the Affordable Care Act wasn't the only thing Republicans promised; they also promised to replace it with something better and cheaper, doing away with all the things people don't like about Obamacare without creating any new problems. Remember, it was Bill Cassidy, not Jimmy Kimmel, who came up with the "Jimmy Kimmel test," the pledge that nobody would be denied health care because of expense.

Yet Republicans never had any idea how to fulfill that promise and meet that test, or indeed how to repeal the ACA without taking insurance away from tens of millions. That is, they were lying about health care all along.

And the base, both the grass roots and the big money, believed the lies. Hence the trap in which Republicans find themselves.

The thing is, health care isn't the only issue on which lies are coming back to bite the liars. The same story is playing out on other issues — in fact, on almost every substantive policy issue the U.S. faces.

The next big item on the GOP agenda is taxes. Now, cutting taxes on corporations and the wealthy may be an easier political lift than taking health insurance away from 30 million Americans. But Republicans still have a problem, because they've spent years posing as the party of fiscal responsibility, and they have no idea how to cut taxes without blowing up the deficit.

As with health care, the party has masked its lack of good ideas with lies, claiming that it would offset lower tax rates and even reduce the deficit by eliminating unnamed loopholes and slashing unnamed wasteful spending. But as with health care, these lies will be revealed once actual legislation is unveiled. It's telling that Republicans are already invoking voodoo economics to justify their as-yet-unspecified tax plans, insisting that tax cuts will pay for themselves by leading to higher economic growth.

At this point, however, few people believe them. The Bush tax cuts didn't create a boom; neither did the Kansas tax-cut "experiment." Conversely, the U.S. economy did fine after the 2013 Obama tax hike, as has the California economy since Jerry Brown raised state taxes. Party apparatchiks will no doubt engage in an orgy of Reaganolatry, but the broader public probably won't be moved by (false) claims about the wondrous results of tax cuts 36 years ago.

So tax policy, like health care, will be hobbled by a legacy of lies.

Wait, there's more.

Foreign policy isn't usually a central concern for voters. Still, past lies have put the Trump administration in a box over things like the Iran nuclear deal: Canceling the deal would create huge problems, yet not canceling it would amount to an admission that the criticisms were dishonest.

And soon the GOP may even start to pay a price for lying about climate change. As hurricanes get ever more severe — just as climate scientists predicted — climate denial is looking increasingly out of touch. Yet donors and the base would react with fury to any admission that the threat is real, after all.

The bottom line is that the bill for cynicism seems to be coming due. For years, flat-out lies about policy served Republicans well, helping them win back control of Congress and, eventually, the White House. But those same lies now leave them unable to govern.

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All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and, on occasion, factual accuracy and verbal verification of authorship. Only two letters per writer are printed each month.

Letters written in response to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and, rather than mentioning the writer by name, should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil and people should be referred to in a respectful manner. Letters referring to news stories should also mention the headline and date of publication.

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