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Opinion

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EDITORIAL

End non-medical exemption to vaccines

Vaccinology is a hard science, a medical miracle that has all but eradicated a host of nasty infectious diseases thanks to the ingenuity and dedication of hundreds of researchers.

It's not a philosophy.

Yet Oregon law allows parents of school-aged children to increase the risk of outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases solely because they have a "philosophical" objection to having their kids immunized.

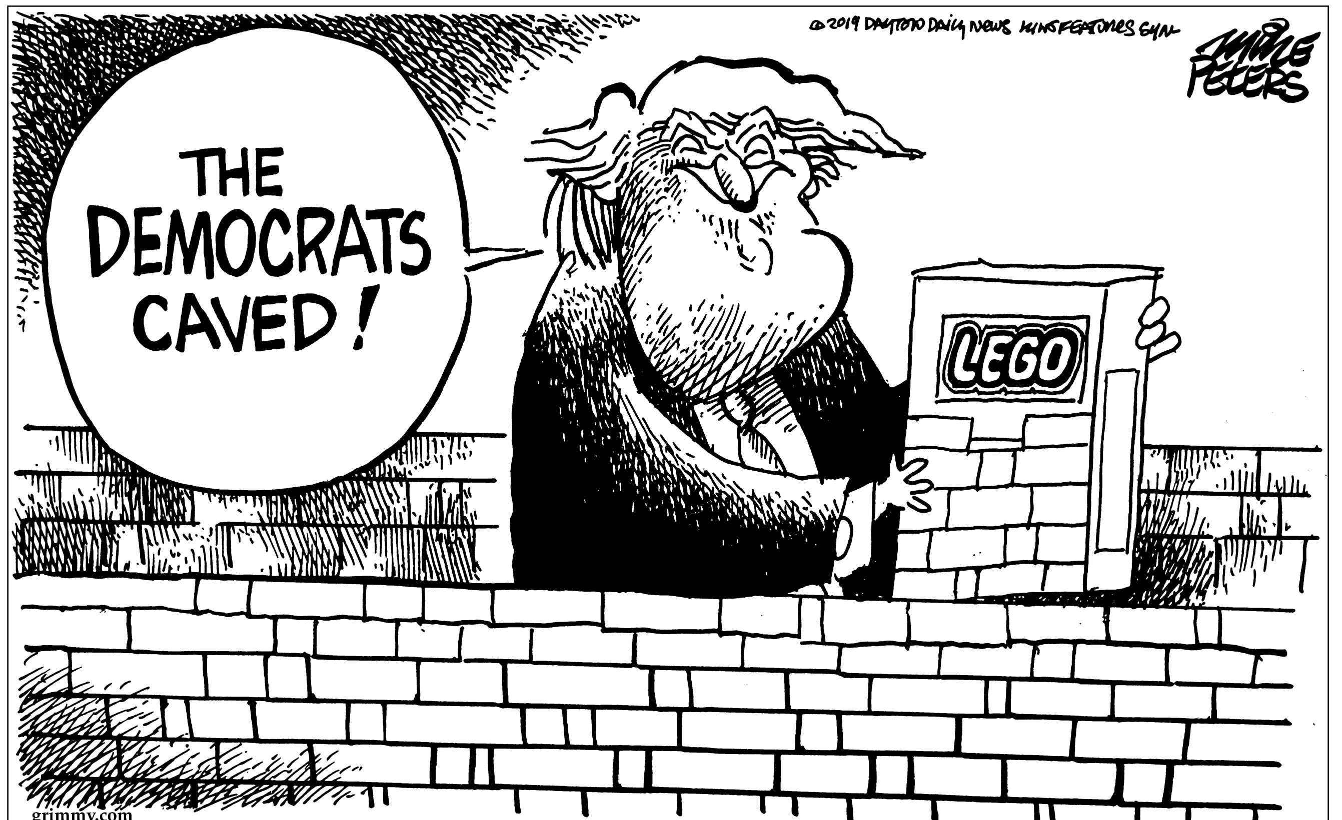
These parents can't defend their decision, which imperils not only their own children but their communities in general, by citing hard science.

That's because the science — and there is an immense volume of it, dating back in some cases several decades — shows beyond any reasonable doubt that vaccines, with extremely rare exceptions, are safe and effective.

We're optimistic, then, that one Oregon legislator who wants to end this indefensible exemption to the state's vaccination requirements for children attending schools will succeed where one of his colleagues failed in 2015. Rep. Mitch Greenlick, a Portland Democrat, is working on a bill that would eliminate the "philosophical" exemption. Kids could still be exempt from vaccines for medical — read: based on science — reasons.

California lawmakers, prompted by a measles outbreak in 2015, dropped the nonmedical exemption. Oregon shouldn't wait for a similar stimulus.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



GUEST EDITORIAL

Withdraw public meetings law bill

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

State Rep. David Gomberg, D-Neotsu, says he has absolutely no intention of reducing public access to public process. But his bill, House Bill 2931, would do just that.

It would deny journalists access to closed-door executive sessions if they do not "ordinarily and customarily report news on matters under consideration by the public body." That would mean unless a media organization regularly reports on actions of the public body the public body could decide to exclude them.

In Oregon, the news media can attend executive sessions. Journalists act as watchdogs. They ensure the public body is not making decisions in secret, among other things. HB 2931 would make that harder.

Consider an example. Let's assume a reporter from The Bulletin wanted to cover a meeting of the Harney County judge and commissioners during a tense occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. The judge and commissioners march into executive session. Under HB 2931, the county could bar The Bulletin reporter from attending because The Bulletin does not usually report on the Harney County Court. That is not an improvement in the law.

Don't think for a second that public bodies don't already try to exclude journalists. On Aug. 13, 2013, a joint committee from the Bend City Council and the Bend Park & Recreation District was meeting to make policy recommendations on the future of Mirror Pond. A Bulletin reporter and editorial writer showed up to report on the meeting. Bend Park & Recreation District Executive Director Don Horton ordered them to leave. Attorneys for both public bodies later said the meeting should have been open to the public. Who knows what happened at that meeting?

HB 2931 has other problems. It also would require each news organization seeking to attend an executive session to adhere to ethical standards without clearly defining what the ethical standards are. That lack of clarity is a mistake.

When we talked to Gomberg about his bill, he told us he was simply trying to fix some parts of the law. "Journalism is changing more quickly than our rules," he said. It was introduced on behalf of the League of Oregon Cities, though the bill fails to identify that.

For instance, one statement in the bill makes it clear that journalists should include nontraditional media, such as bloggers. Scott Winkels of the League of Oregon Cities said another intent of the bill is to clarify that people with a connection to a matter in executive session can not attend that session.

Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum has already clarified both those points in a written opinion. Gomberg and Winkels told us they would look again at the language in the bill. "Bills evolve," Gomberg said. They should just pull it from consideration.

Letters to the editor

Letters are limited to 350 words. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days. Email letters to news@bakercityherald.com.

Book reveals new insights into the Cold War

JAYSON JACOBY

The work of historians is particularly useful, naturally, when it describes events that happened before the reader was born.

Accomplished historians can give readers at least a hint of the societal atmosphere — what people were saying and thinking and even feeling — during a period the readers didn't actually experience.

But I was reminded recently of how compelling historical works can be, and how revealing, even when they deal with happenings that coincide with my own lifetime.

The source was a book, "The Dead Hand," by David E. Hoffman, a longtime journalist and contributing editor to The Washington Post.

The main title to Hoffman's 2009 book serves its purpose in luring the reader — who wouldn't want to know what a "dead hand" is — but its subtitle, as subtitles are supposed to do, more fully explains its subject: "The untold story of the Cold War arms race and its dangerous legacy."

Hoffman won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in general nonfiction for "The Dead Hand."

He deserved it.

Hoffman pulls off a feat that eludes many authors of similar histories. He deftly mixes the elements of a Tom Clancy-style military thriller, complete with hefty dollops of technical jargon, to craft a story that's consistently exciting but never diverts the reader into a tedious, eye-watering slog through multisyllabic jargon.

Although the subtitle mentions the Cold War, Hoffman actually concentrates on the late stages of that conflict between the capitalist West, led by the U.S., and the communist eastern bloc defined by the Soviet Union.

The majority of the book covers the period between 1980, when Ronald Reagan was elected to the first of his two terms as president, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

Hoffman's narrative is built largely around the interaction between Reagan and the reformist Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev.

Although Hoffman's focus is on the end of the Cold War, he also gives readers, by way of background, a brief but effective summary of the conflict's origins and some of its more noteworthy events.

He also explains certain aspects of that era that sound ludicrous today — and perhaps seem all but inconceivable to readers for whom the Berlin Wall was never anything but souvenir chunks of graffitied concrete and a place where David Hasselhoff once performed so memorably.

As the 21st century nears its third decade it can indeed seem the height of folly that the world's two superpowers for decades didn't merely accept as a matter of course, but to various degrees endorsed, such notions as MAD — Mutually Assured Destruction.

This was the idea that because both the U.S. and the Soviet Union possessed nuclear arsenals more than sufficient to obliterate each other's country — and much the greater part of its population — neither side would attack because to do so would guarantee the annihilation of both countries.

It was this precarious brand of "peace" in the midst of a "war" — which featured no actual battles between the two main antagonists — that lends such an absurdist aura to the post World War II geopolitical landscape.

I was prompted to pluck Hoffman's book from the library shelf in part because I like to read about political and military history.

But what gave me a little thrill of anticipation as I scanned the outline printed on the jacket is that I actually lived through the period that makes up the bulk of Hoffman's book. This piqued my curiosity in a way that a book examining, say, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, which predated my birth by eight years, does not.

As I made my way through the chapters I realized just how thin my understanding was of those crucial latter days of the Cold War — a veneer of knowledge best measured in microns.

I could proffer my age as an explanation but that seems to me a flimsy excuse.

I was a teenager, or a young adult, during much of the period when Gorbachev and Reagan (and, in the final couple of years, George H.W. Bush) were meeting for historic summits in Reykjavik and other places to negotiate the partial dismantling of the fission and fusion stockpiles on which their countries had spent trillions of dollars and rubles.

But even if I had been too absorbed back then with MTV and school and largely fruitless attempts to impress certain girls, I have had ample time since to at least partially fill the yawning chasm in my education.

But until I read "The Dead Hand" I had scarcely even started that process.

I wasn't even a third of the way through the book when I recognized that my version of the Cold War's waning days was — and I'm being charitable to myself here — a sort of abbreviated Cliff's Notes.

I could recite all the superficial clichés.

Reagan was a narrow-minded, bellicose former actor whose military spending spree gave the tottering Soviet Union a gentle push into an abyss where it was destined to plunge anyway. His reckless "evil empire" and "the bombing starts in five minutes" taunts served only to increase the risk of a catastrophe.

Gorbachev, meanwhile, was the true statesman, the reformer who, as his 1990 Nobel Peace Prize attests, deserved the greater share of the credit.

But the real world, suffice it to say, is rather more complicated than the lyrics of Don Henley or Jackson Browne might imply.

Hoffman obliterates such simplified portrayals. He shows, with a journalist's eye for detail and an historian's gift for placing events in context, how similar Reagan and Gorbachev were in their disdain for nuclear weapons.

I was surprised how eager Reagan was at times to curtail the arms race — often to the chagrin of his aides and advisers, who counseled moderation.

And I was stunned at how different the reality was in the Soviet Union compared with the popular conception of Gorbachev as a man who would have dismantled the Warsaw Pact much sooner if not for the stubborn ideologues in his own country and the jingoistic Reagan in the White House.

A thread throughout "The Dead Hand" is how the Soviets, continuing for years after Gorbachev's ascension to power in 1985, pursued the most extensive — and thus terrifying — program of germ warfare in world history.

And this happened despite the Soviet Union having signed a biological weapons treaty in 1972, three years after the U.S. abandoned its offensive biological weapons program in 1969 at the order of President Richard Nixon.

To me the most chilling passages in Hoffman's book aren't those dealing with a potential atomic Armageddon — anyone who grew up, as I did, during the era of the TV movie "The Day After" knows that fear — but rather the prospect of the Soviet Union unleashing a genetically engineered strain of the plague that would resist all medical treatments.

It's a prospect that persisted well into the 1990s, years after the Cold War supposedly had been won.

Indeed it persists even today. Hoffman notes in the epilogue that stockpiles of weapons and weapon ingredients that might remain, nuclear and otherwise, could present an irresistible enticement to terrorists and rogue nations that, though they lack the technological prowess and immense resources of the Soviet Union, also lack that nation's inherent rationality.

Ultimately, Hoffman accomplished what I believe all historians strive to do — he enriched my understanding of the world.

And he made me reconsider what I thought I knew about a topic.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.