

EDITORIAL

Solving a problem

We have as a country identified a problem — police brutality, and in particular the mistreatment, and too often the killing, of black Americans.

Although it's more accurate to say we are paying more attention to a problem that had existed for a very long time, and one that is not limited to any race.

Describing a problem usually is easier than solving it.

This is no exception.

The point is not that we should dally.

Procrastination is not acceptable when lives are at stake.

But neither should we act rashly — which is to say, without considering all the likely ramifications of our decisions.

This is especially crucial when it comes to policing. Because police officers save lives.

If in making necessary reforms to police agencies we fail to tailor those reforms to deal with the specific problem of brutality, there is the risk that in trying to solve that problem we will create another, and one that also endangers innocent people.

This would make any victory Pyrrhic at best.

The challenge is to curb police brutality without impeding police from doing what in the vast majority of cases they do, which is to protect the public from those who would harm us, sometimes by putting their own lives in jeopardy. Nor should we take any action that puts police in greater jeopardy.

This is a challenge in part because no single approach is appropriate for every police agency.

At a minimum we need to examine each agency individually to determine whether its officers have used excessive force, and if so, how often.

The public should ensure that officials who oversee police departments make these reviews a priority. But we should understand that this necessary task can't be accomplished in a week or two.

Another longer-term step is to seek changes to police union contracts that make it more likely that officers punished for using excessive force will not continue to work as police because contract provisions limit agencies' abilities to deal with such officers.

There are also some sensible proposals that could be undertaken immediately, although some are in effect in many agencies now.

The campaign "8 Can't Wait" — 8cantwait.org — suggests, among other things, that police agencies "Require officers to intervene and stop excessive force used by other officers and report these incidents immediately to a supervisor," and "Require officers to report each time they use force or threaten to use force against civilians. Comprehensive reporting includes requiring officers to report whenever they point a firearm at someone, in addition to all other types of force."

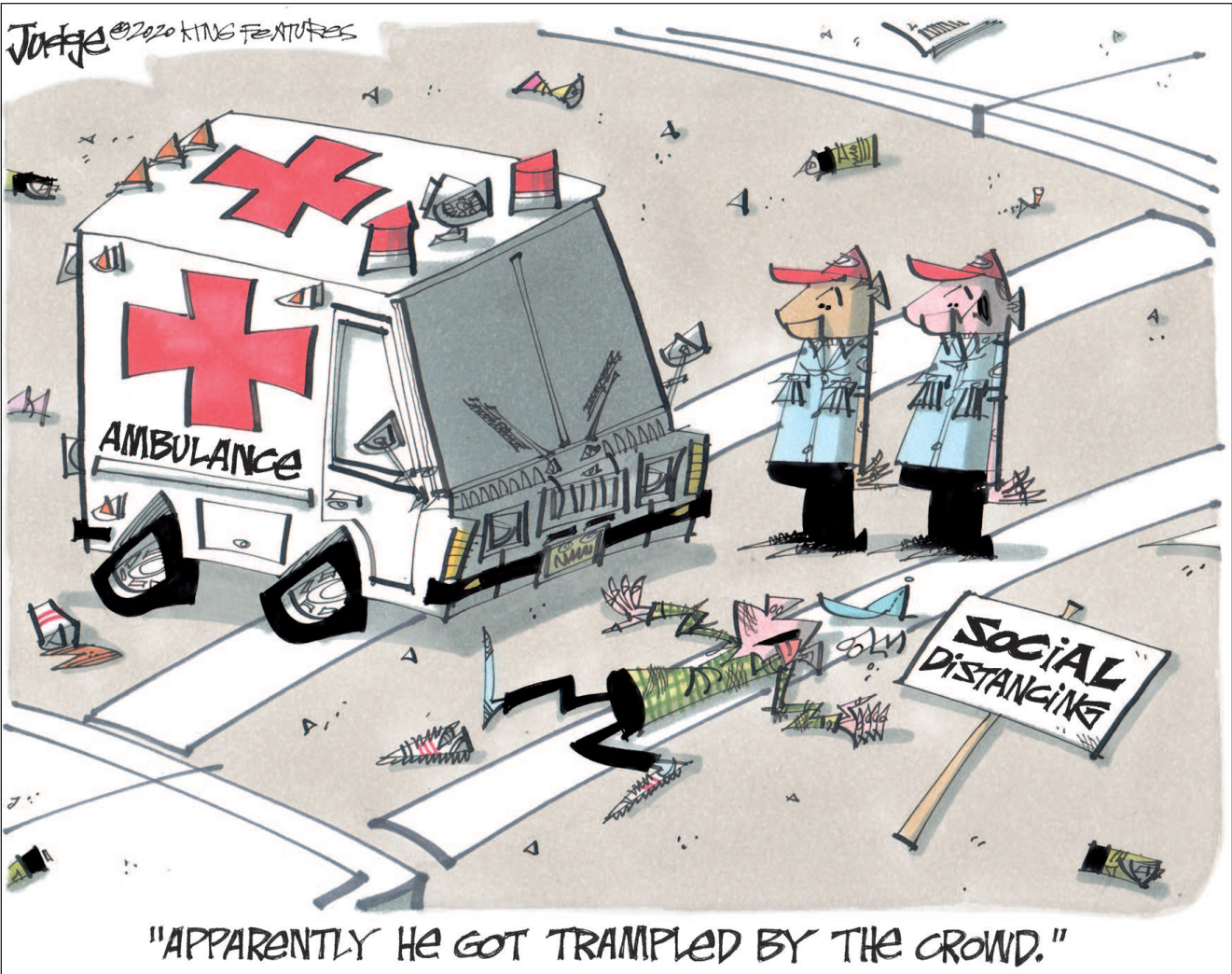
The Baker City Police Department and Baker County Sheriff's Office already require both in their use of force policies, which are essentially identical.

That policy reads: "Any officer present and observing another officer using force which is clearly beyond that which is objectively reasonable under the circumstances shall, when in a position to do so, intercede to prevent the use of unreasonable force." The policy also requires officers who sees another officer using unreasonable force to report it to a supervisor. Also, the policy states that "any use of force by a member of this department shall be documented promptly, completely and accurately in an appropriate report." The report must include why the officer felt the use of force was necessary.

We should require police to be transparent — through the use of body cameras and mandatory public disclosure of reports related to use of force incidents, or complaints about such incidents.

The momentum for making meaningful reforms is considerable. But we must not let the passion that has invigorated so many people lead to changes that aren't real solutions or, worse still, create new problems.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

We need to embrace all humanity in our hearts

A few days past I heard a couple of news items on PBS relating to the ongoing demonstrations against police brutality.

The first on PBS radio was an interview with two academic investigators who were wondering how the current common structure and prevalent attitudes in today's police organizations came to be. Their findings were very revealing. Prior to the early 1600s there were no organized police departments/groups. Then with the beginnings of black slavery in the U.S. the slave owners needed a way to capture and return their runaway slaves. They formed "slave police" groups to track down the escapees, punish them and return them to their "rightful owners." The local authorities being generally led by the

slave owners approved of this practice and authorized the "police" to deputize any white male necessary to help them in this catch, punish and return effort. This established escaping from slavery a crime in the minds of general populace and introduced racism as a cultural norm in American society in the very beginnings of this country.

The second news item was the PBS TV broadcast of the George Floyd eulogy given by the Rev. Al Sharpton. His address very clearly showed where the racism and brutality practiced by many police officers originated. The innate "escaped black slaves are criminals" mentality of the police officers, their leaders and the "deputized" majority of the nation's citizens is systemic in this country. This became quite clear when the Reverend called for this American society to "get your knee off our neck."

He stated very emphatically for 400 years you have had your knee on our neck, get it off.

As your article on the editorial page of the Herald's June 6, 2020, issue illustrates, this black slave racism is so deep in our collective psyche it is extremely difficult to expose it to critical view. But that is what needs to happen if we are to ever get over this ugly, irrational, knee-jerk cultural norm. We each one need to look deeply into the experiences and influences in our lives and be honest with ourselves where these have influenced our perceptions of others' human rights.

We have to quit enslaving blacks and other racial, ethnic and religious minorities in our minds. Only then will we embrace all humanity in our hearts.

Ramon Lara
Baker City

Looking back to late '60s offers perspective on events of 2020

America is coming off one of the most difficult three-month stretches in its history. First came a devastating pandemic that has killed more than 108,000 Americans and destroyed more than 40 million jobs. Then came protests in more than 580 cities and towns — and some rioting — touched off by the brutal Memorial Day killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis — one more grim example of decades of police violence against African Americans.

But by the numbers, matters were far worse in America in the mid- to late 1960s. Deadly police-related riots in 1965 in Los Angeles, in 1967 in Detroit and Newark, N.J., and across the nation after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968 make the violence seen since May 25 seem tame. Exact figures are unavailable, but hundreds were killed and many thousands of stores were ransacked and emptied.

Yet historical accounts that focus on these riots and the assassinations of King and Democratic presidential front-runner Robert F. Kennedy in 1968 miss the extent of anti-government dissent in the late 1960s. Bombings of government buildings, banks, corporate offices and other symbols of the establishment by revolutionary groups such as the Weather Underground were common. A phenomenon that began with campus radicals throwing Molotov cocktails at police during protests evolved into domestic terror campaigns by revolutionaries that hit an early apex from Nov. 10 to Nov. 12, 1969. In New York City alone, the landmark public library, the Rockefeller Center, Chase Manhattan headquarters, and offices of Hanover Trust and General Motors were all fire-bombed. A shopping center in St. Louis and a power plant in Seattle were also bombed.

CHRIS REED

The onslaught led a shaken President Richard Nixon to tell FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover that "revolutionary terror" was a genuine threat to democracy. And that was before an 18-month stretch in the early 1970s in which the U.S. averaged nearly five bombings a day.

While recent looting and violence have unnerved many Americans, they don't compare to what the U.S. faced back then.

But the bad news for modern America is that while actual arson was far worse a half-century ago, the society that weathered the tumult of the Vietnam War was stronger and more cohesive than our present society, which has faced a steady increase in what might be called partisan civic arson over the last 30 years. In the 1960s, there were still conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans. In 1964, a higher percentage of congressional Republicans voted for the landmark Civil Rights Act than congressional Democrats.

But Nixon's cynical 1968 presidential campaign began the makeover of U.S. politics. Strategist Kevin Phillips persuaded the campaign to use the passage of civil rights laws to draw Southern Democrats into the GOP by using barely coded racial appeals. The makeover did not come quickly. In 1974, for example, there was true bipartisan support for Nixon's impeachment after the worst revelations in the Watergate scandal.

But now the parties are far more likely to constantly be at each other's necks, especially among the most active members. True believers on each side increasingly view reality through dif-

ferent filters.

Consider the protests in recent weeks across the nation by those who thought quarantine policies adopted in more than 40 states violated their freedoms and destroyed their ability to provide for their families. Many on the right are bitter that these protesters were scorned by the media, not widely praised as the nonviolent George Floyd protesters have been. Meanwhile, many on the left are bitter that quarantine protesters were not treated as roughly as some police forces have treated George Floyd protesters.

The era of perpetual 24/7/365 grievance started years ago. But now it's been supercharged, both by racial unrest driven by police violence and an unprecedented instant recession after a long boom.

And, of course, by a president with easily the most bizarre view of the job of anyone who has ever held it. I bet even many of Donald Trump's millions of fans wish that — like Ronald Reagan after the 1986 space shuttle Challenger disaster and George W. Bush after 9/11 — this Republican president tried to bring the nation together to mourn the tragedies we collectively face.

Yet Trump is a symbol of American dysfunction, not the cause. Our divisions may be less endlessly aggravating and acrimonious under President Joe Biden, but the mutual loathing now on mass display isn't going away.

By then we can hope that the soundtrack of our times will be something less troubling than the clashes of police and protesters.

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