

EDITORIAL

Interesting way to deliver aid

It's hard to imagine a better way to encourage people to stay 6 feet apart than to offer them \$500 checks on a first-come, first-served basis.

Nobody would line up for that, right?

But although the crowd that gathered Thursday afternoon outside Old West Federal Credit Union in Baker City — a scene replicated in communities across Oregon, until the money ran out Friday — all but demands a sarcastic response, the situation isn't especially amusing.

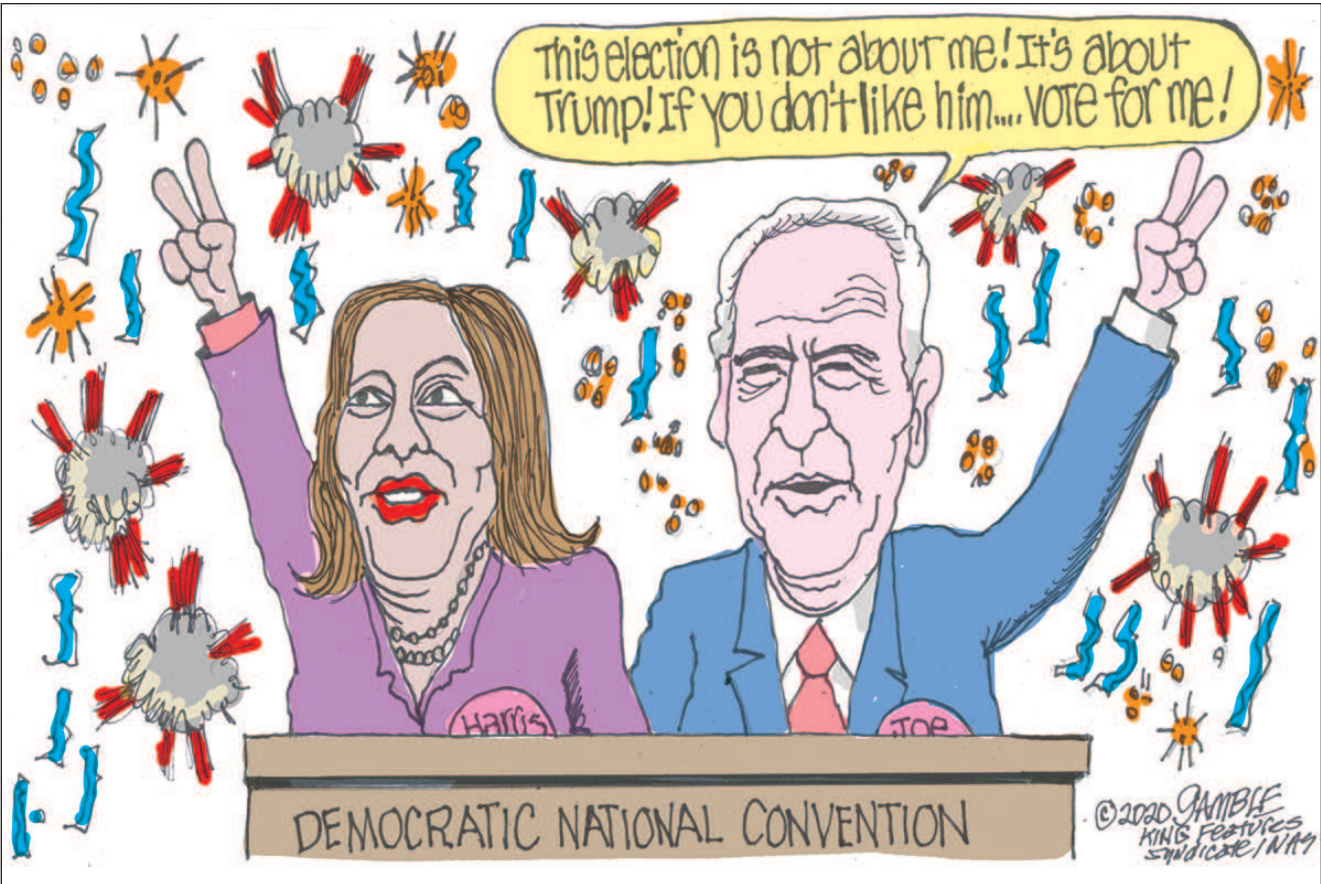
The Oregon Legislature in July allocated \$35 million from the state's federal COVID-19 aid to distribute to residents who have suffered financial hardships due to the state's restrictions designed to reduce the spread of the virus. To be eligible for a one-time \$500 payment, people must, among other criteria, have earned less than \$4,000 per month before the pandemic started, be 18 or older and able to prove their identity, and have unemployment benefits still pending. Some people who haven't applied for unemployment, or who were denied, might also qualify.

The state's decision to disburse the \$35 million in a fashion reminiscent of a promotion by a minor league baseball team stems from its own failures to process unemployment claims during the pandemic. The federal government gave Oregon \$85 million to modernize its computers. That was in 2009. Yet the state has spent almost none of the money. And the Employment Department's computers have performed like, well, like computers that haven't been modernized.

The people who have received a \$500 check need the money, to be sure. And those who are still waiting for unemployment checks definitely deserve it.

But it's hard to believe there wasn't a method to distribute the money that didn't force people to stand in lines for hours. That's just the sort of thing state officials have been telling us not to do.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

Hope for peace in the Middle East

Editorial from The Dallas Morning News:

The constant churn of our own politics obscured last week an event that should have gotten more attention in the U.S. because it was a moment of hope for a more peaceful future.

We are talking about the historic agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, a piece of classic diplomacy that signals progress toward lasting peace in the Middle East.

The accord between the two countries promises full normalization of relations in exchange for Israel ending the contested plan to annex occupied territory in the West Bank.

For Israel, the deal means a third Arab nation, including Egypt and Jordan, has recognized it diplomatically and will engage openly in relations. UAE and Israel have had dialogue for years in an open diplomatic secret. But the formalization is important to Israel in a part of the world where many want it wiped from the map.

For UAE, the deal means a bilateral relationship that could lead to greater trade and commerce both with Israel and throughout the world.

Most important for everyone, the accord represents another wedge against the continued and growing threat of Iran. It is hard to overstate how dangerous and destructive Iran has become both regionally and throughout the world.

Israel has understood this for a very long time, as have the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia. Throughout the broader Arab world, Iran's role in sowing discord and strife is getting greater attention. For UAE and Israel, opening diplomatic ties comes down to challenging a common foe.

As Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a former Iranian official, was quoted: "In the eyes of the Arab street, Iran is now the enemy. We are finding ourselves in a situation where our neighboring Arab countries are turning to Israel to confront Iran."

That's why this is a game-changer for the world, something the Trump administration deserves credit for.

"This deal is a significant step towards building a more peaceful, secure and prosperous Middle East," President Donald Trump said during an Oval Office press conference. "Now that the ice has been broken, I expect more Arab and Muslim countries will follow the United Arab Emirates' lead."

The president is right. Other gulf states could follow UAE, a step that would be an important breakthrough for regional peace. And even in Saudi Arabia, there is potential movement toward greater cooperation with Israel.

In all of this, the Palestinian people must be considered. First, it was crucial that Israel step back from its plan to annex the occupied West Bank. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's bluster over this plan was a local political play. This lets him step back while saving face.

Palestinians deserve a state of their own, and a two-state solution is crucial to lasting peace in the region. But such a peace is unlikely to bloom if Israel is in a constant posture of self-defense. Normalizing relations throughout the Arab world prior to a lasting settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian question will bring about that settlement more quickly, not less.

All the world should hope for this, as well as a new day for Iran, when its dangerous regime is replaced with true leaders who seek peace and prosperity for their own people as well as the region they live in.

COVID-19 is scary, but are we too fearful?

Coronavirus is a frightening disease.

Viruses often are.

They're so tiny, not even alive in the normal sense of the word, and yet capable of wreaking immense havoc.

Scientists have made miraculous progress, especially in the past several decades, by creating vaccines that protect us from many viruses that had been prevalent, including those that cause polio and measles.

Yet COVID-19 has reminded us, like nothing since the Spanish flu pandemic more than a century ago, of how vulnerable we can be when our immune systems are confronted by a new invader.

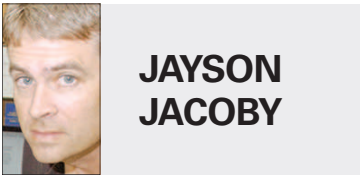
I think it is reasonable to worry about COVID-19 — to have a healthy respect for it, as inapt as that adjective might be under the circumstances.

I also believe it is responsible to take simple precautions to protect ourselves and others. These include wearing a face mask in public places where you can't keep your distance from others, to reduce, however modestly, the risk that you might be infected but have no symptoms and inadvertently spread the virus to someone else.

We can quibble over the absolute accuracy of the statistics with which we have been bombarded daily for the past five months.

While I'm writing this, on Aug. 21, the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) says 412 Oregonians have died due to COVID-19.

The U.S. death toll is about 174,000.



JAYSON JACOBY

I have read credible news stories, ones based on interviews with surviving relatives, which convince me that some of these deaths are wrongly attributed to the virus — the now familiar "died with COVID-19, but not from COVID-19" cases.

But I don't believe these account for anything but a minuscule percentage of the tally of fatalities.

And even if as many as, say, 10% of deaths were mislabeled — I haven't seen anything proving the rate is that high, to be sure, but it's a figure that makes the calculations simple even for hapless math students as I surely am — this virus would still have killed 166,600 Americans, including 371 Oregon residents.

And this in something like half a year, which is no great span to compile that many obituaries.

These are numbers which I find impossible to blithely dismiss as so much government-sponsored fear-mongering.

So yes, COVID-19 is scary.

But for all that, when I ponder the extent to which we have remade society to try to curb this pandemic, I wonder whether we have exaggerated the threat the virus poses.

To put it another way, it seems to me that we've allowed our fear,

legitimate though it is, to infect us with something that in its way is at least as troubling as the disease. Except this infection is more like a cancer, in its ability to weaken what once was strong. It's an affliction that has made us not merely cautious, which is a sign of wisdom, but also seemingly too afraid to confront this challenge with the vigor and the creativity that have so long defined the American spirit.

Our default decision has become the cancellation.

We purport to be serious about considering whether we can actually do something, can put on a favorite celebration or resume some fixture of society that has been put on hold. Yet this ritual of sober contemplation has become a sort of charade, the outcome devoid of suspense, the words of regret from the organizers announcing another nonevent as predictable as a political speech, albeit with more sincerity.

Fear, of course, thrives on ignorance.

The mysterious danger is almost always more sinister than the one we can not only name but that has its own Wikipedia page.

But although we have much yet to learn about COVID-19, we know quite a lot more than we did five months ago.

Most importantly, we know beyond any doubt that the virus is considerably more dangerous to well-defined segments of the population — those older than 50 and people with existing health problems, in particular.

In Oregon, for instance, people in their 20s account for 22% of cases — the largest percentage among age categories divided in 10-year increments — yet only one person in their 20s has died among the 412 total deaths as of Aug. 21.

And still we can't devise a way to have a college sports season.

Or, in Baker City and many places, allow students to return to their classrooms.

What bothers me about these decisions is not that they're unreasonable.

What bothers me is that they represent the triumph of an insidious and virulent strain of complacency. I don't mean that we're lazy, but rather that we have become so cowed by events beyond our experience that we have become accustomed, in a relatively short span, to settling for what we perceive to be the safe course over the risky.

And this is precisely the problem.

Even as we smartly adopt precautions that afford us some measure of actual protection in our everyday pursuits — distancing, masks, obsessive handwashing — we seem unwilling to refine those proven tactics to much narrower, and thus easier to manage, things such as sports and schools.

No rational person expects Autzen Stadium in Eugene to be packed with 56,000 Oregon Ducks fans on several Saturdays this fall.

But Pac-12 football, even the conference-games-only schedule proposed earlier this summer, won't happen in any form, fans or no.

It seems to me that we have conflated any level of risk related to COVID-19, however minuscule, to a matter, quite literally, of life or death, and not only for the individual but for everybody.

We have become so obsessed by the number of cases, a daily toll far more familiar to many of us than stock market statistics or baseball standings, that we have, I fear, come to consider those numbers the most accurate measure of the danger this virus poses.

But we know this is not so.

We know, better than we knew in March or even in May, that the vast majority of the people who are represented in those daily tallies will recover completely. We know some of them never even had the slightest sniffle. And we know that many of them didn't unwittingly infect somebody who then got terribly ill or even died.

And yet in so many instances — schools and college settings being only two prominent examples — we have, rather than accept the challenge of stemming the spread of the virus through strategies of proven efficacy, succumbed to the cavalcade of cancellations.

I understand that COVID-19 is new.

But I don't think its novelty justifies society continuing to treat it as not merely a marginally greater threat than other diseases, but as something so uniquely horrendous that we must concede our impotence against its scourge.