

# Opinion

BAKER CITY  
**Herald**  
Serving Baker County since 1870

Write a letter  
news@bakercityherald.com

## EDITORIAL

# Freeway frustration

The sequence of events is as predictable as it is frustrating.

Snow begins to fall along Interstate 84 in the Blue Mountains between La Grande and Pendleton.

The freeway gets slick.

Vehicles — most often commercial trucks, and often trucks that don't have traction chains installed — lose control or momentum.

The lanes in one direction, and sometimes both, are blocked.

And once again the main travel route through Northeastern Oregon is closed.

When the freeway is blocked for more than a few hours — and this is often the case when trucks are involved, as they're more cumbersome to move than passenger cars are — the closure can extend for more than 150 miles. As safe parking areas for commercial trucks are claimed in, say, La Grande, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) frequently has to close the freeway at Baker City and, as the domino effect continues, in Ontario.

The effect works in the opposite direction, too. A couple crashes in the eastbound lanes in the Burnt River Canyon between Durkee and Huntington can trigger a cascade of closures starting in Baker City and later spreading to La Grande and Pendleton.

Weather-related closures on I-84 aren't a new phenomenon, to be sure.

Blizzards, particularly through passes such as Ladd Canyon and the Blue Mountains near Meacham, can create whiteouts so severe that closing the freeway is necessary.

But although ODOT doesn't have detailed historical data about the frequency of I-84 closures in our region, even a cursory review of media reports shows that the freeway has closed more often in the past several years than in past decades — and in conditions that aren't particularly treacherous.

As mentioned above, it hardly rates as a surprise when the freeway closes, even during a relatively modest storm such as the one that descended on the Blue Mountains Monday evening, Dec. 13.

A cold front brought a few hours of heavy snow, but this was no extended blizzard that cut visibility to the length of a truck trailer and made it dangerous for all vehicles.

ODOT's press release announcing the closure noted that the culprit was "multiple spun out trucks" in a three-mile section of the westbound lanes between La Grande and Meacham.

The closure, fortunately, was relatively brief, lasting about four hours.

Yet it was also the latest example of how fragile this vital transportation pike seems to have become. It's not an exaggeration to wonder whether it's possible to get through even a modest storm — of which we can expect several in a typical winter — without a closure.

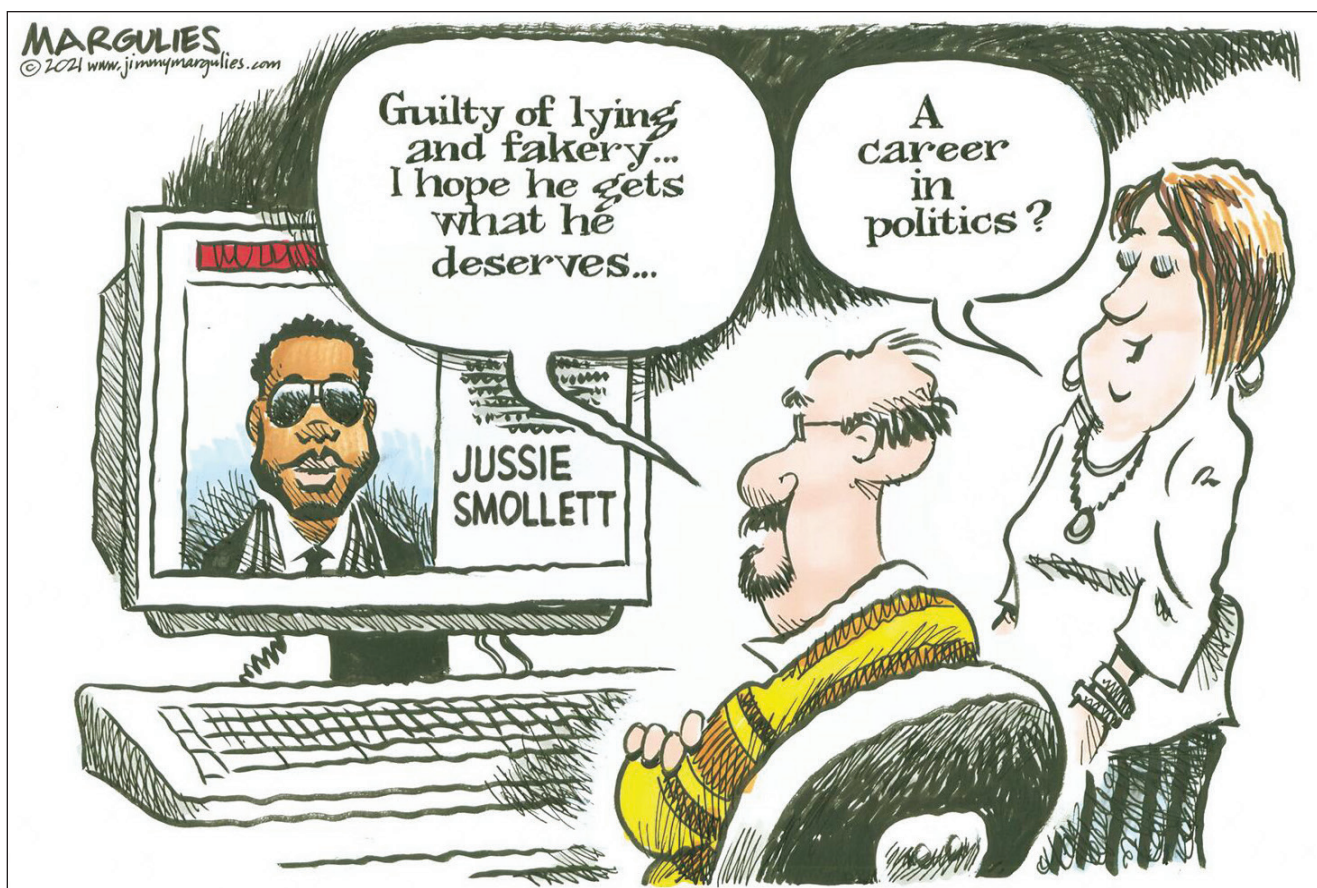
The culprit in Monday's closure — unchained trucks — is a common one in freeway closures, said Tom Strandberg, a spokesman for ODOT in La Grande. In hopes of encouraging drivers to put on chains, in late September the state doubled the fine for failing to comply with the chain requirement from \$440 to \$880. That's a reasonable change. Unchained trucks not only are responsible for many freeway closures, which is at best annoying, but worse, they also pose a threat to other drivers.

The problem isn't limited to commercial trucks, certainly. All drivers on the freeway during winter need to be prepared for snow and ice, either by installing traction tires or by bringing chains. And all motorists should drive with caution, according to the conditions.

Over the past couple decades, ODOT has done many things to try to make I-84 safer, including building a third lane on steep grades such as Ladd Canyon and Spring Creek, installing electronic signs to warn drivers of bad weather, and improving chain up zones.

Those are worthwhile improvements. But none can replace plain old common sense.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



# Bob Dole deserved respect

By GEORGE SKELTON

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — For decades, Bob Dole wouldn't talk about the war wounds that left him with crippling disabilities. But by his 1996 presidential race, he was opening up.

"There I was over in Italy on April 14, 1945, a young 2nd lieutenant.... Our job was to prevail, and we were prevailing, and I was leading a platoon and I got shot," I heard him tell workers at a bomber parts plant in Pico Rivera during the '96 California primary.

"And I spent the next 39 months in and out of hospitals learning how to feed myself and go to the bathroom and walk and all those things we take for granted."

Dole had been leading an infantry charge and just dragged a wounded radioman to safety when mortar fragments shattered his right shoulder and cracked several vertebrae.

He never regained the use of his right hand, and his right arm was virtually useless. His left arm was weak. It would take him an extra hour to get dressed every morning.

Aboard Dole's campaign plane flying to San Francisco after the B-2 plant stop, I asked the Senate majority leader why for most of his life he hesitated to talk about the combat wounds.

"I thought it was a private matter," he answered. "I thought people might think, 'The guy's looking for pity.'"

So, why now, I asked.

"I'm trying to break down this barrier between those of us in politics and the real people ... and their belief we're just power hungry and insiders and we don't care about them. We've never had any trouble in life. We just all ended up in Congress. Let 'em know I've had a life too."

A noble cause but not a promising one. It's in the American DNA to cynically look down on politicians with suspicion. Actually, most are mixed bags of strengths and weaknesses like the voters who elect them. Like Dole.

He grew up on the Kansas plains, survived the war wounds, rose to the highest perch of the U.S. Senate, ran once for vice president and three times for president, and finally won the Re-

publican nomination in 1996.

Dole died at 98 on Dec. 5. He'd been diagnosed with advanced lung cancer.

He was respected as a practical compromiser who worked with both sides to cut good deals for the country. But he also was denigrated as a gut fighter who hit below the belt.

In 1996, Dole was trying to smooth the hard edges on his reputation as a meanie.

The most infamous example of Dole throwing a low blow came during his 1976 vice presidential debate with Democrat Walter Mondale. I was sitting in the Houston auditorium helping to cover the debate for The Times and winced when Dole implied that Democrats were to blame for war.

"If we added up the killed and wounded in Democrat wars in this century it would be about 1.6 million Americans," he said.

Mondale swiftly replied, "Sen. Dole richly earned his reputation as a hatchet man tonight."

Later, Dole admitted he'd overreached and displayed his familiar self-deprecating humor.

"I went for the jugular," he said. "My own."

After President Ford chose Dole as his running mate at the GOP convention in Kansas City, fellow Times reporter Bob Jackson and I spent several days in the VP nominee's small hometown of Russell, Kan., interviewing relatives and friends.

Western Kansas was much like California's Central Valley farm belt, except for fewer people and no enchanting Sierra Nevada backdrop. Lots of plain, hardworking folk.

We talked to Dole's first wife, Phyllis, who expressed no bitterness about her former husband asking for a divorce after 24 years of marriage. They both remarried.

"A lot of things he did," she told us, "he was proving to himself he could do them.... The competition of politics may have been a substitute for the athletics he missed" as a high school star.

In my 1996 interview, I asked Dole whether his disability had changed him personally.

"A little bit," he replied. "It's made me more sensitive."

He added: "You can't do anything about it, you might as well learn to live with it. And I think it makes you stronger in many ways. You understand not everybody's perfect."

I found Dole very pleasant to talk with — good natured, candid and gracious. No demagoguery or hatchet tossing.

Marty Wilson, who was Dole's California campaign manager during the primary race he won easily, recalls him not being ruffled by personal attacks. A rare politician.

"I suspect that's because what he had to overcome as a young soldier was so much more challenging than the silly crap that goes on in politics," Wilson says.

Veteran strategist Ken Khachigian, who ran Dole's California general election campaign, recalls the Kansan's affinity for common people. The two were staying in Santa Barbara, and Dole asked where they should dine.

"I said, 'There are a lot of fancy restaurants in Santa Barbara, but my favorite is a place where I hung out in college. It's not fancy. It has steaks, onion rings, salsa, French fries. It's called Joe's Cafe,'" Khachigian remembers.

"He said, 'That sounds perfect. Let's go there.' He loved it. Couldn't have been happier. It reminded him of a steakhouse in Russell."

Stu Spencer, the retired dean of California political consultants who was Ford's national strategist in 1976, says Dole had "no match" for combining "a great politician, legislator and good-humored man. Throw in honesty and integrity and you wonder why he wasn't elected president by acclamation."

He never came close, losing California and the national electoral vote by large margins to President Clinton.

But Dole won the nation's respect — and deserved it by acclamation.

*Political columnist George Skelton has covered government and politics for nearly 60 years and for The Los Angeles Times since 1974.*

## Your views

### Wonderful Christmas events in a great community

I had the pleasure of seeing the "hometown" Christmas parade and lighting the beautiful tree. I am sure there were well over 1,000 people attend-

ing these events. After tending one of the warming barrels for the Lions Club then helping pick up the leftover wood at the end, I went home and forgot my chair. The next morning I went back and, surprise, it was still there. Thank you

for the honest citizens of this wonderful community. I could not be more proud!

Thank you from a grateful, longtime Baker City resident.

**Robert McKim**  
Baker City

## CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

**President Joe Biden:** The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; 202-456-1111; to send comments, go to [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

**U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley:** D.C. office: 313 Hart Senate Office Building, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-3753; fax 202-228-3997. Portland office: One World Trade Center, 121 S.W. Salmon St. Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; 503-326-3386; fax 503-326-2900. Baker City office, 1705 Main St., Suite 504, 541-278-1129; [merkley.senate.gov](mailto:merkley.senate.gov).

**U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden:** D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building,

Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-5244; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-7691; fax, 541-963-0885; [wyden.senate.gov](mailto:wyden.senate.gov).

**U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz (2nd District):** D.C. office: 2182 Rayburn Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20515, 202-225-6730; fax 202-225-5774. La Grande office: 1211 Washington Ave., La Grande, OR 97850; 541-624-2400, fax, 541-624-2402; [walden.house.gov](mailto:walden.house.gov).

**Oregon Gov. Kate Brown:** 254 State Capitol, Salem, OR 97310; 503-378-3111; [www.governor.oregon.gov](http://www.governor.oregon.gov).

**Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read:** [oregon.treasurer@ost.state.or.us](mailto:oregon.treasurer@ost.state.or.us);

350 Winter St. NE, Suite 100, Salem OR 97301-3896; 503-378-4000.

**Oregon Attorney General Ellen F. Rosenblum:** Justice Building, Salem, OR 97301-4096; 503-378-4400.

**Oregon Legislature:** Legislative documents and information are available online at [www.leg.state.or.us](http://www.leg.state.or.us).

**State Sen. Lynn Findley (R-Ontario):** Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., S-403, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1730. Email: [Sen.LynnFindley@oregonlegislature.gov](mailto:Sen.LynnFindley@oregonlegislature.gov)

**State Rep. Mark Owens (R-Crane):** Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., H-475, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1460. Email: [Rep.MarkOwens@oregonlegislature.gov](mailto:Rep.MarkOwens@oregonlegislature.gov)