

EDITORIAL

Embracing a bright outlook

Two years ago, COVID-19 had yet to arrive, officially, in Baker County.

But its effects certainly had.

The county's first confirmed case of the virus didn't happen until May 6, 2020. Only three of Oregon's 36 counties had their first case later than Baker County's.

Yet even as we waited, through March and April, for the inevitable confirmation that a resident had been infected — undoubtedly the virus was here earlier — we were being affected much as other counties were.

Events were canceled.

Restaurants were limited to takeout meals.

Students attended classes via computer screens in their homes rather than in classrooms.

We hoped at that time that this societal upheaval, unprecedented for so many residents, would end relatively soon.

And although some of the restrictions did either ease or go away altogether over the ensuing months, the specter of the pandemic persisted.

After the relatively brief period of tranquility in the late spring and early summer of 2021, the delta variant drove case totals and infection rates to then-record highs during September.

There was another lull for much of the autumn and early winter, before the omicron variant — much more contagious but also considerably less dangerous — broke delta's records during January.

But today the outlook is much brighter than it has been since the beginning of the pandemic.

The omicron surge peaked almost two months ago.

Baker County's weekly case count has dropped for seven straight weeks, plunging by 96% over that period. The county reported seven cases for the week March 6-12 — the fewest since July 18-24, 2021.

But the situation is even more promising than those statistics suggest.

The number of people, locally and elsewhere, who have significant protection from becoming seriously ill with COVID-19, through vaccination or natural infection, is higher than ever before.

This prompted Oregon Gov. Kate Brown and other officials to make the reasonable decision to end mask requirements.

(Masks are still required in some settings, including hospitals, where the added layer of protection is sensible.)

Some people will choose to continue donning a mask in some situations. We should respect that decision, which is of course a personal matter and one that doesn't affect others.

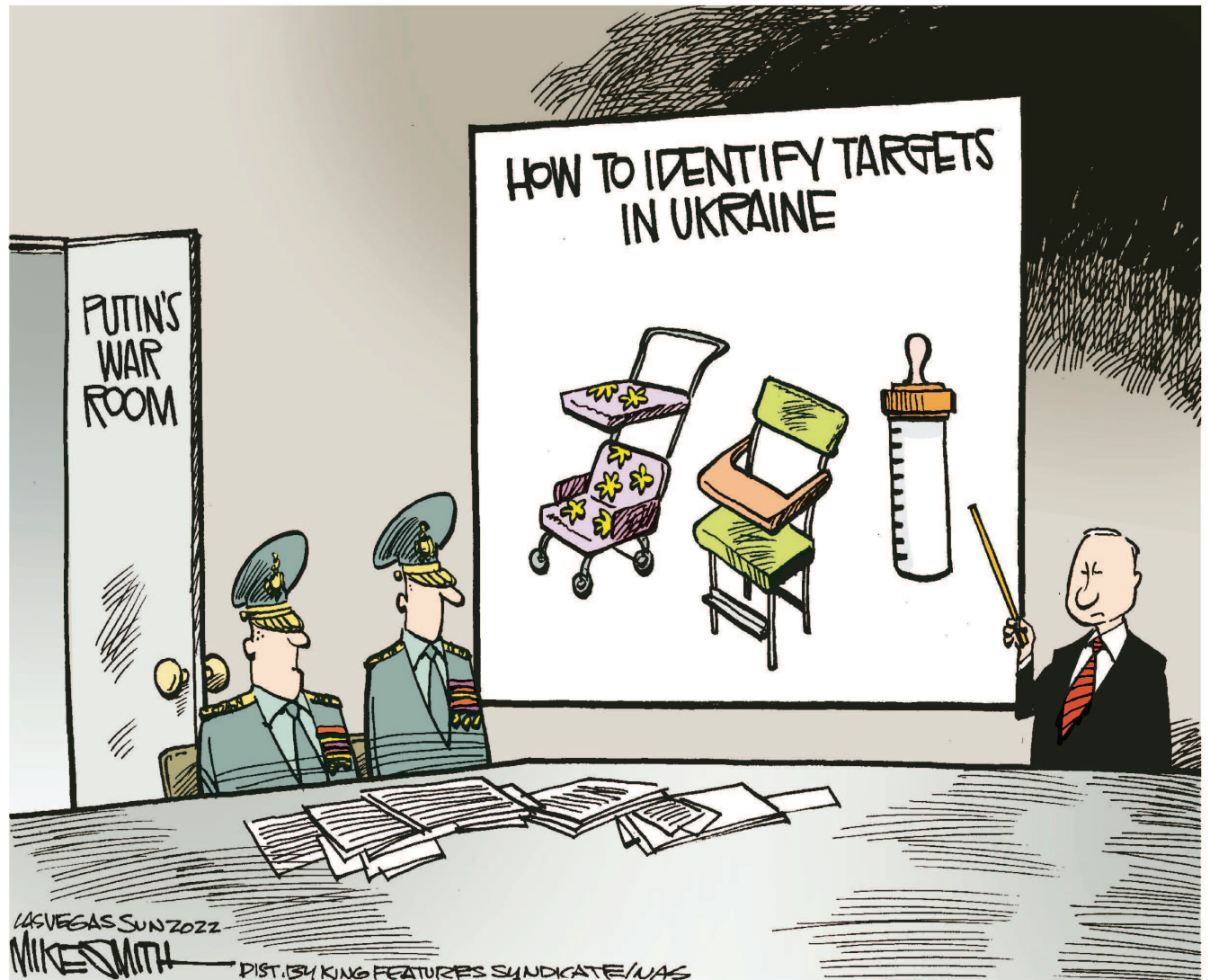
As we look forward to a spring and summer that should be much more normal than the 2020 and 2021 versions, there are still steps some of us can take to further strengthen the barriers thwarting the virus.

If you haven't been vaccinated but are eligible (everyone 5 and older), consider doing so. Although some experts, including vaccine proponent and inventor Dr. Paul Offit from the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, haven't endorsed booster shots for children and young adults based on the negligible benefits for those groups who are at low risk for serious consequences from COVID-19, they continue to strongly support two shots of the Moderna or Pfizer vaccine.

Baker County has a regrettably low rate of vaccination — 55.7% of residents 18 and older have had at least one dose, according to the Oregon Health Authority. That's the fifth-lowest rate among Oregon's 36 counties.

Vaccines haven't been as effective at preventing omicron infection, to be sure. But the statistics are clear — people who are vaccinated are less likely to contract COVID-19, and substantially less likely to get severely ill or die. From July 2021 through February 2021, of the 3,761 COVID-19-related deaths reported in Oregon, 74% were in unvaccinated residents.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



COLUMN

Biden treads fine line with Ukraine

BY NEIL LANCTOT

The shocking Russian invasion of Ukraine has left most Americans bewildered, angry and deeply troubled. But exactly how our nation should respond remains unclear. Polls have shown a surprising number of Americans uncertain about the desirability of sanctions or the admission of Ukraine into NATO, although most wholeheartedly support President Joe Biden's refusal to deploy combat troops.

But few recognize that another Democratic president, also in office less than two years, faced a near-identical crisis over 100 years ago. In the early weeks of World War I in 1914, news of the brutal German invasion of Belgium reached President Woodrow Wilson and the American public.

Wilson, though deeply sympathetic to the Belgians, recognized that the attack complicated his vision for America's place in the European war. The United States and its people, he had believed, must remain "impartial in thought as well as in action." Only then would the nation be in a position to play a significant role in the eventual peace process and postwar reconstruction of Europe.

The president, then, consciously refused to denounce the German invasion, a decision Wilson's great political adversary Theodore Roosevelt came to violently oppose. But Roosevelt initially believed Wilson had handled the situation appropriately. The Belgians' dilemma, Roosevelt observed, was unfortunate but not surprising. "When giants are engaged in a death wrestle," he wrote, "they are certain to trample on whoever gets in the way of either of the huge, straining combatants."

Just as today, few Americans possessed more than a rudimentary understanding of what had caused the war in Europe or even the Belgian invasion.

"We are a very shortsighted and ignorant people in international affairs," Roosevelt grumbled. Still, most desperately wanted to do something for Belgium. Some Americans enlisted in the French or British armies, but the easiest way to help was to give to the now-ubiquitous Belgian relief charities. Even children willingly participated, dutifully surrendering their pennies to "adopt" their starving counterparts in Belgium.

For the celebrated social worker Jane Addams, these activities were simply not enough. As a pacifist who viewed war as especially destructive to the reforms she had advocated for years, Addams believed the Wilson administration needed to do much more. "Our neutrality should be a vigorous and dynamic kind that is not content to sit still with folded hands waiting for Europe to cease fighting," she said. "Such peace is not worthy of a great people. Nor is it enough to send shiploads of food and clothing to destitute Belgians, splendid as that is."

Addams, Roosevelt and Wilson, all progressives of the early 20th century stripe, understood that the Belgian invasion and the European war were of critical importance to the United States. Roosevelt, though never quite advocating war, at least before 1917, believed it was essential for the United States to beef up its pathetically small army of some 100,000 men. Otherwise, America would be in no position to assist small nations such as Belgium violated by predatory powers. For Addams, militarism of any kind was never the answer. America's efforts should be directed toward finding a way to end the conflict. "The United States," she said, "should throw every bit of its power into the scale for peace."

Wilson, like Biden today, faced the greatest burden. He understood that much of the country strongly opposed American involvement in European af-

fairs. On the other hand, American trade with the Allies and travel to Europe resulted in multiple disturbing incidents (the sinking of the British ocean liner RMS Lusitania, among others) between 1914 and 1917, pushing the country dangerously close to involvement in war.

For more than two years, Wilson managed to thread a very difficult needle. He placated pacifists such as Addams by his interest in peacemaking and a future League of Nations, while also moving toward the military "preparedness" Roosevelt advocated. But ultimately Germany's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare in early 1917 forced Wilson into a war he never wanted. By then, he came to believe involvement was necessary if the U.S. was to have any influence in the peace process and a new world order.

Wilson's decision for war had enormous ramifications. Bolstered by American forces, the Allies decisively defeated Germany in 1918, imposed harsh conditions at Versailles and set the stage for a second World War 20 years later. In 2022, Biden must also weigh the considerable potential impact of his response to the crisis in Ukraine. Any move in the wrong direction might lead to a wider war, a disrupted global order and serious political setbacks for the Democratic Party, the identical challenges faced by Wilson between 1914 and 1917.

But unlike Wilson, Biden has at his disposal 21st century tools such as powerful economic sanctions and the support of a virtually united international community. Only time will tell whether they will be enough to resolve the current crisis.

Neil Lanctot is the author of "The Approaching Storm: Roosevelt, Wilson, Addams, and Their Clash Over America's Future." The book chronicles America's path to eventual involvement in World War I.

YOUR VIEWS

Concerned about Putin's continuing quest for power

This letter is in response to a recent editorial by the editor of the Herald which took to task those who believe that the invasion of Ukraine by Russia could possibly lead to World War III. I believe that a much closer look is required.

The onset of World War II occurred when Hitler occupied Austria. He used the pretext that Austria was historically a part of Germany and that its citizens were essentially German. The German

occupation of Austria was, for the most part, peaceful. Nevertheless, World War II flowed from this initial move of Hitler.

As far as I can determine, Putin moved against Ukraine claiming that Ukraine was historically Russian. It seems that Putin believed that absorbing Ukraine into Russia would be relatively peaceful. He miscalculated. He miscalculated the ferociousness of the Ukrainian people in defending their homeland and he miscalculated the strong reaction of the free world. Yet he persists in his destructive invasion of Ukraine. He is now asking for

aid from China! So, what is the ultimate goal of Putin?

I have concluded that Vladimir Putin's frustration in Ukraine will continue to grow. That coupled with Putin's unquenchable thirst for power could well lead him to use increasingly desperate measures which might include a nuclear strike. Should this happen World War III could well be triggered. CIA Director William Burns expressed just such a concern in recent congressional testimony!

Sig Siefkes
Baker City

OTHER VIEWS

The new reading instruction emergency

Editorial from The New York Daily News:

Three consecutive chopped-up school years have had the expected effect on student learning. New research shows that growing numbers of kids are falling behind in reading, with Black and Hispanic as well as low-income and disabled children suffering the most. American public schools were no great shakes at literacy instruction before COVID. Now we're in a full-blown educational emergency.

Among dozens of studies saying essentially the same thing: A new report by Am-

plify, a private curriculum and assessment company, says that the percentage of kindergarten students at highest risk for not learning to read rose from 29% in the middle of the 2019-20 school year to 37% two years later. According to a Virginia study, early reading skills hit a 20-year low last fall. Last summer, consulting firm McKinsey & Company estimated that U.S. students had lost the equivalent of almost a half a school year in reading instruction. And in every case, kids who started out disadvantaged experienced the steepest slide.

We don't know exactly how bad things are here in New York City because very few students took state assessment tests during the pandemic. But if we wait for a definitive diagnosis before intervening aggressively, it'll be too late.

Fortunately, the crisis coincides with the early days of a new mayoral administration committed to improving on Bill de Blasio's woefully unrealized promise to get all kids on track to be proficient in reading by the end of second grade. Chancellor David Banks, correctly decrying the en vogue "balanced literacy"

approach that failed far too many kids over far too many years — nearly two-thirds of Black and Hispanic New York City public school kids are proficient in reading — is wisely pushing phonics-based instruction in the early years.

Banks should crunch the data and identify the schools, whether district-run or charter, that have had the most success in getting kids of all backgrounds reading, and reading well as early as possible. Share their techniques. Replicate them. As somebody once said, leave no child behind.