

Opinion



A Kansas Viewpoint

What distraction?

The Topeka Capital-Journal

We cringe to think common sense is becoming more common in California than Kansas, but that appears to be the case. The home of Hollywood and unlimited ballot propositions is well ahead of the Sunflower State in recognizing the danger of driving while holding a cell phone to your ear.

Beginning July 1, it will be illegal in California to hold a cell phone and conduct a conversation while driving. Exceptions will be made for emergency calls. The fine and court fees for a first offense will cost a driver \$76. The total price for subsequent offenses will be \$190. ...

Give a nod to California for joining New York, Connecticut and New Jersey on the short list of states that have decided to take some action. ...

California's law will allow adults to converse via cell phones while driving so long as they aren't holding the phone to their ears. ...

Teenage drivers won't be allowed to except during emergencies. ...

And text messaging? Illegal for teenage drivers but no restrictions on adults.

Joe Simitian, the state senator largely responsible for pushing the California law, said he didn't include text messaging because it was difficult enough to get his colleagues to pass the law on cell phone conversations.

We understand his frustration. We don't understand why lawmakers willing to prohibit using hand-held phones for conversations while driving would be reluctant to ban typing on one.

Some studies have indicated it's the conversation, not the telephone, that most distracts drivers. If that's so, a conversation via text messaging has to be just as distracting, if not more so.

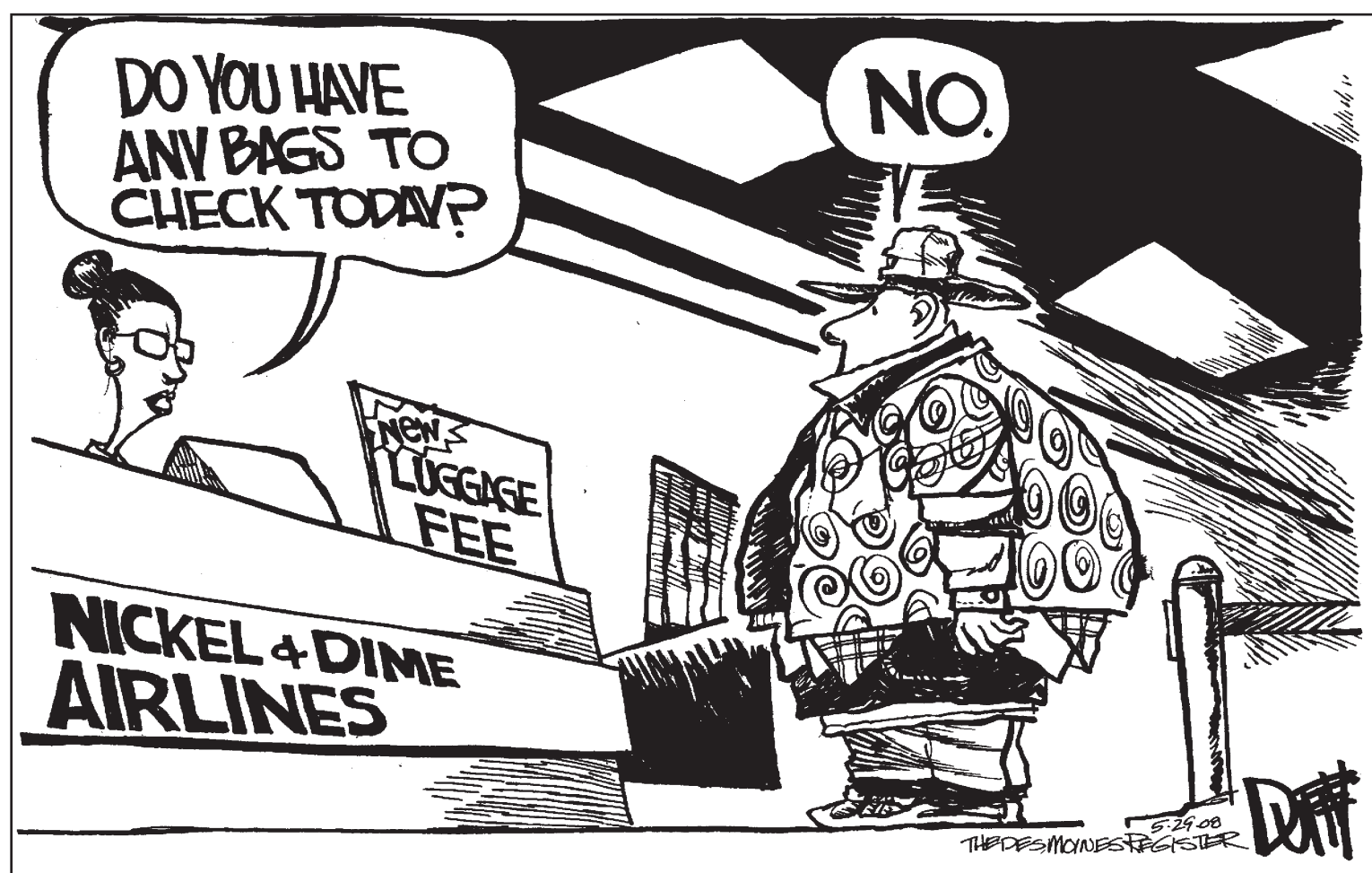
When our legislators gather in January for their 2009 session, we'd encourage them to revisit the cell phone issue and consider whether our streets and highways wouldn't be safer if drivers weren't distracted by telephone conversations and text messages.

To steal a phrase from California's Simitian, there's no study that shows drivers are safer with cell phones in their hands than they are when they have both hands on the wheel.

Where to write, call

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- U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback**, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. 202/224-6521
- U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran**, 2202 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. 202/225-2715 or Fax 202/225-5124
- State Rep. Jim Morrison**, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St. Rm. 143-N, Topeka, Kan. 66612. 785/296-7676 e-mail: jmorrison@ink.org web: www.morrisonfamily.com
- State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer**, State Capitol, 300 SW 10th St., Rm. 128-S., Topeka, Kan. 66612, 785/296-7399 ostmeyer@senate.ks.us

Comments to any opinions expressed on this page are encouraged. Mail them to the Colby Free Press, 155 W. 5th St., Colby, Kan., 67701. Or e-mail jvanostrand@nwks.com or pdecker@nwks.com or opinion@nwks.com. Opinions do not necessarily reflect the *Free Press*.



A friend in need



John Van Nostrand

• Line in the Dust

For a split second, I automatically thought the worst.

I noticed I had a telephone message in the hotel room I just checked into. It was late, about 12:30 a.m., and I didn't know if I should have called at that moment. I took my chances and waited until morning to call Kevin, the person who left the message, and who was going to get married two days later.

Turned out that message was to remind me to be a good friend.

Last summer, Kevin asked me to be one of his groomsmen in his wedding which was held May 31 in Athens, Ga. We met about 10 years ago when we both lived in the same Iowa town. I was the weekly paper's editor, he was the high school band teacher. It was his first teaching job out of college. He moved to town about six months after we did.

Kevin, my wife Jennifer, me and a select, few other new people in the town quickly created a social network. We would get together to play board games, daytrips to Des Moines and even went to renaissance festivals near Kansas City and Minneapolis, Minn.

Kevin and I went to Des Moines to watch "The Phantom Menace" at a Des Moines mall theater, before noon. We also sat through an on-again-off-again-rain at an Iowa Cubs game (minor league team) and eventually sat in the seats behind home plate because those fans had left. Kevin, who has an interest in gourmet cooking, occasionally invited Jennifer and I over to see what we thought of his newest creation.

He left Iowa about a year before we did to acquire his master's, and is now working on his doctorate in music, at the University of Georgia in Athens.

Even though he left Iowa before we did, we still kept in touch with occasional phone calls and e-mails. Then, about seven months after we moved to Colby, Kevin's sister Sarah

found her first job after college at the weather service in Goodland. What a coincidence.

Because of his studies, Kevin has not been able to visit his sister very often, but we have enjoyed spending time with Sarah and her parents who live in Virginia and visit Sarah about four times a year. Their parents are wonderful people: generous, caring, compassionate and positive.

We have been included in some longstanding family traditions. For years, their family decorates gingerbread houses for Christmas. Kevin showed us the art-form when we were all still in Iowa. We continued building houses in Goodland. My two children also enjoy the fun and food of building gingerbread houses.

So when Kevin called late last summer and asked me to be in his wedding, it was hard not to say no. At that time, I was to be one of six groomsmen. The other five were people he met in Virginia and through college at Northwest Missouri State where he acquired his bachelor's.

I've been in friends' weddings before. I wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary. I had to go get measured for a tux and was just expecting to stand in my spot during rehearsal.

Four days before the wedding, we met Kevin and his fiancée, Amy, at a brilliant restaurant in Social Circle, Ga., (east of Atlanta). Kevin highly recommended it. He was right. I swear God works in that kitchen.

After the last bite of pecan pie and sweet tea, we went our separate ways. That would have been the last moment of whatever Kevin and Amy thought normal was.

When I called back Kevin Friday morning, he said everything that we talked about over fried-green tomatoes and chutney was not quite the same. While moving pews at the church, one pew fell on Amy's foot and broke some toes. Her foot would be in a walking cast, but, fortunately, hidden by the length of her wedding dress.

The tux shop in Athens had no record of my measurements, even though I called them in early March. We had to go to the store to piece a tux together with whatever they had left.

Then Kevin asked me to be his best man. Wow. I gulped. I accepted.

His original best man, who lives in Missouri, tore his achilles tendon about two weeks before the wedding while playing basketball. Kevin said he was still in too much pain to travel. Foot-related injuries seemed to be the theme of the wedding. The preacher also had a foot in a cast. While standing in the church during the ceremony, I noticed a young girl also in a foot cast.

I was flattered he asked me to be his best man. The other four groomsmen were two sets of brothers. One set he had known since his childhood since they were neighbors in Virginia. Their parents are still neighbors today. The other set of brothers Kevin met while in Missouri.

I keep thinking Kevin asked me to be the best man because he didn't want to show any sort of favoritism among the other four. Jennifer said I shouldn't think that. She's right.

I should just think about being Kevin's friend.

— John Van Nostrand is publisher of the Colby Free Press

Forget rebates ... change the system

By Bob Keener

Tax rebate checks are going out to millions of taxpayers (and some people without enough income to pay taxes) to prop up our sagging economy and help folks who aren't doing very well.

But giving umbrellas to people stuck in a hurricane doesn't really help much. And for those in the middle and the bottom of our economy, the past few decades have indeed battered them like a hurricane. No longer does a rising tide lift all boats. While we've been busy becoming two-income workaholic families rowing our little dinghies, the captains of industry have turned our economy into their own floating casino where they make all the rules — and surprise! — the house always wins.

So not only are the rebate checks a drop in the bucket, they don't get to the underlying problems. It's no accident that the big yachts have risen significantly during the past few decades while more modest boats have taken on water and are sinking. It's not just that some have learned to bail and pump better than others. The rules are rigged.

Unlike the weather, which follows rules of nature, our economy follows rules made by humans. Not only can those rules be changed, but we know where the power is to demand those changes. It's in the power of the majority, the people who during the past few decades have not fared well economically compared to the significant gains of the wealthiest minority.

In other words, it's the same people who are getting the rebates.

According to the IRS, 130 million households will receive these rebate checks. The census bureau says that we average about two adults per household. So we're talking about more than twice the number of individuals, 126 million, who voted in the 2004 national election. That's a lot of potential power.

But we sure don't feel very powerful standing at a gas pump paying \$4 per gallon, when oil companies make record profits for their investors and oil executives make 400 times what average workers make. And we don't feel very powerful standing in line at Wal-Mart buying \$3 T-shirts made in China and handing our credit card to a part-time worker who can't get health insurance.

As individuals, we can't change the rules to make the economy better serve the needs of 130 million households simply by making good economic choices. In an election year, we tend to blame the incumbent and put all our hopes on the new nominee, but in case you think that changing the president will significantly change the economic rules, please note that tax cuts for the wealthy happened under Bill Clinton as well.

No, the president — even with Congress — doesn't have much power to change the economic rules. All their policy negotiations are with lobbyists who have much more clout than they have: More clout with corporate leaders,

more clout with the media and more clout with the wealthy.

But imagine the clout of 260 million rebate check receivers — 85 percent of the entire U.S. population. If we could all organize and demand an economy that works for us, the president, Congress and all the lobbyists in the world couldn't stop us.

We could cap CEO pay, establish a living minimum wage, require trade deals to be more fair, tax wealthy investors more than their secretaries, support unions, and so on. And we could measure the impact by tracking economic inequality. Is the economy lifting all boats or is it lifting the big boats a lot more?

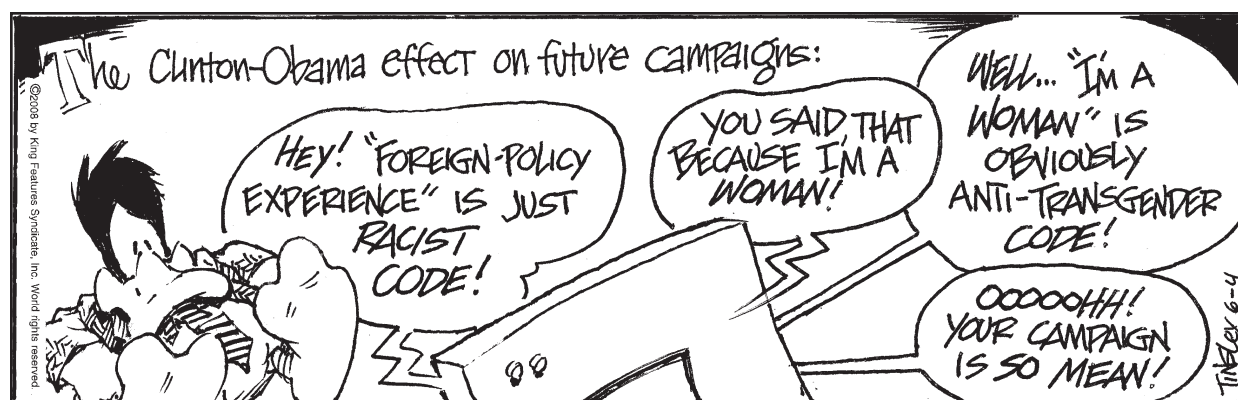
If you're receiving a rebate check this spring and summer, it's because our economy needs you. So, you could just go shopping, or you could use it as a reminder to start making the economy change. For example, you could join a group or coalition that's working to make the economy more fair. Separately, we can change little. Together, we can change much.

Your rebate check is a reminder that our economy is not working well for you — and 260 million like you. Yes, our economy needs you — to start making it change.

— Bob Keener is communications director at United for a Fair Economy, an independent organization raising awareness about the dangers of growing inequality. stw@stw.org. Distributed by minutemanmedia.org

Mallard Fillmore

- Bruce Tinsley



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