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EDITORIALS

DRIVERLESS CARS: IS STATE'S APPROACH BEST?

The California Department of Motor Vehicles released preliminary rules last week for driverless cars that led Google, a pioneer in the field, to pronounce itself “gravely disappointed.” DMV’s most significant requirements: The cars must have a steering wheel, can only be used if a licensed driver is in the vehicle in case the autonomous driving system fails and can only be leased, not sold, to state residents.

DMV officials say they want to strike a balance between safety and encouraging a promising technology. They won applause from some corners. But Bryant Walker Smith, a University of South Carolina law professor who is an authority on the legal issues involved with self-driving cars, told Associated Press that California’s rules point “to a very long slog ahead for not just Google, but really other automakers as well.”

We’re not sure this slog is necessary. We wonder if

the DMV grasps how much safer driving will be once the 94 percent of driver-caused accidents begins to be reduced; the present yearly average of 32,000 U.S. traffic deaths would dwindle. We also wonder if there’s an appreciation of the enormous environmental gains that would result in a future in which fleets of driverless electric cars moved Californians from place to place, or how much it would improve the lives of those who can’t drive for various reasons.

Smith believes California is “leading in the wrong direction,” given the impressive safety results seen so far in tests of driverless cars. But unlike with auto emissions rules, where the Golden State often inspires the rest of the nation, it’s not going to happen with autonomous cars. Instead, Texas is likely to take the lead in introducing the driverless future, thanks to Google testing facilities in Austin — and to state regulators who appreciate the immense promise of this technology.

A FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP ON TRADE

The 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, the largest free-trade trade deal in history and a legitimate Obama administration achievement that both parties should have celebrated, is lamentably dead until 2017 and perhaps beyond. Blame both parties.

The TPP, a deal with 11 other nations of the Pacific Rim that promises significant economic benefits in particular for San Diego, this state and the nation, has been opposed by organized labor, and therefore most Democrats in Congress, since long before the deal was ever finalized in October after seven years of negotiations.

But the opposition of more than a few Republicans was a sad twist. They’ve generally been more clear-eyed about the benefits of free trade. In this era of bitterly divided politics, too many Republicans apparently just aren’t willing to give Obama any kind of victory, even at the expense of economic growth.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell advised Obama not to even bother sending the deal to Capitol Hill for approval until after the 2016 elections.

This is a failure of congressional leadership all around.

ROBERT J. SAMUELSON

The Washington Post

HOW TRUMP DOES IT

Welcome to what I’ve called “the politics of self-esteem.” By this, I mean that increasing numbers of people, on both the right and left and most with good intentions, have become politically engaged because it makes them feel better. It raises their self-esteem. This phenomenon predates Donald Trump’s candidacy, but it helps explain a Trump puzzle that baffles many observers.

By now, the puzzle is familiar. Trump repeatedly says things that seem (by conventional wisdom) hateful, offensive, stupid or simply wrong. But instead of these apparent missteps backfiring — sowing doubt about his competence and moral values — just the opposite happens. The more Trump flouts prevailing norms, the more popular he becomes among Republicans. The latest example: After proposing a widely criticized ban on all Muslims entering the country, his support among Republicans jumped to 38 percent in December from 32 percent in November, according to a Washington Post-ABC News survey.

Trump has not redefined politics, but he has exploited a fundamental change of recent decades. Since World War II, much of national politics has involved a struggle for economic benefits. In 1940, the government transferred about 7 percent of national income from some groups to others. Now, that share is nearly 20 percent. This remains a huge part of politics, as debates over highway spending, farm subsidies, taxes and so much more remind us. But spending decisions are incremental; sweeping shifts are unlikely. We’re not going to abolish Social Security.

Against this backdrop, politics is increasingly shaped by issues that are cast in moral terms: abortion, affirmative action, gay rights, global warming, guns, immigration and health care — to name a few. Compared with most economic matters, these issues are much more combustible politically. On many economic questions, you can negotiate compromises that please, or displease, almost everyone equally. There’s room for give-and-take. By contrast, compromises on moral questions are usually hard and often impossible.

The people who support these various moral crusades — again right and left — are generally sincere. Liberals pledge to save the planet; conservatives vow to end illegal immigration. But their very passion suggests that they feel morally superior to their opponents and crave anything that strengthens their sense of superiority. They receive what I call “psychic benefits,” just as Social Security beneficiaries receive economic benefits. Significantly, these psychic benefits do not require the enactment of legislative agendas. Any-

thing that makes your side look good or the other side look bad will suffice.

What his supporters most like about Trump, even if they disagree with some of his policies (as some inevitably do), is that he defines himself — he does not let others do it for him, and this rubs off on them. It’s liberating. As he asserts his moral superiority over the judgments of the “political establishment” and “mainstream media,” so can his supporters defy others’ hostile judgments of their values. In the contest for the high moral ground, they have a champion and a spokesman. They feel better about themselves. These are the psychic benefits.

Politics is increasingly shaped by issues in which both sides claim the moral high ground.

For the “political establishment” and “mainstream media” — admittedly ambiguous groupings — this poses a dilemma. When Trump makes proposals that strike them as simplistic, unworkable, undesirable or, worse, racist, they have two choices, both bad. If they decide not to react, their silence may seem to condone policies that they abhor. The second choice is to denounce many of Trump’s ideas, but this plays into his hands because the more he is attacked by despised outsiders, the more popular and admired he becomes among supporters.

What results is a bizarre, though fascinating, spectacle. Trump proposes. His opponents (pundits, politicians, “experts”) pounce criticizing and fulminating. And Trump’s popularity rises.

It is not inevitable that this cycle continue indefinitely. Trump may stumble. Some other candidate — or candidates — may soar. The avalanche of criticism may reach a critical mass, raising fresh doubts among some followers. Or Trump’s out-sized ego may begin to offend onetime allies. Politics is a fickle business. Still, his success has so far stunned many veteran reporters and election observers who have underestimated his political skills.

The more durable lesson here concerns the politics of self-esteem. Our system of governance is increasingly infused with a sanctimony all along the ideological spectrum that makes political accommodation and compromise harder to achieve. Well-intentioned people often act in rigid ways that maximize their personal self-esteem while perversely making it harder for the country to govern itself.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Welcome a new water solution for the region

I just left the Carlsbad Desalination Plant dedication ceremony (“Desalination boosts California water outlook,” Dec. 15) and can sum it up thusly: Water is life. Life is a symphony.

The orchestra of Poseidon and its associates will play that symphony for the next 30 years, piping it into homes and businesses throughout the county.

A lovely symphony.

Dan Marler
San Marcos

The season is about more than Christmas

Regarding “Glad La Jolla still bucks the Christmas trend” (Dec. 16): The original reason for the season was winter solstice — shortest days, longest nights.

Christians forcefully replaced the celebration when they took over pagan peoples, the same with the other pagan sacred days (think Easter).

Happy winter solstice, everybody.

Elizabeth Lunn
Serra Mesa

Chapter was right to secede from national

Regarding “San Diego Alzheimer’s chapter secedes” (Dec. 4): In 1980, 12

family caregivers of loved ones with Alzheimer’s disease met at Kensington Church and became the first California Chapter of the National Alzheimer’s Organization.

In 1984, my late husband, George Glenner, a preeminent UCSD researcher, identified beta amyloid as the basis for Alzheimer’s disease and testified before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Aging that federal funding should support both research and care for this dehumanizing disease. Congress concurred.

The national organization siphoned 40 percent of chapter’s funds and decided to make all decisions and to take all donations. San Diego, Orange County and New York chapters, thus far, have separated from national. Please support Alzheimer’s San Diego.

Joy Glenner
Rancho Santa Fe

The Paris climate pact is a good first step

Regarding “Climate change pact historic, but flawed” (Dec. 15): Spiritual leaders, including hundreds of venerable Buddhist leaders like the Dalai Lama and Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, weighed in on the COP21 Climate Summit urging climate pledges to keep global temperature

increases below 1.5 degrees Celsius.

These venerables are speaking up for the vulnerable: small island nations that will be underwater due to rising sea levels from global warming, and millions more, mostly the poor in urban areas, who are vulnerable to food insecurity, drought and heat-related fatalities.

It is happening in the U.S. too — native communities in Alaska are being relocated due to warming.

I support these leaders. We have an agreement now, let’s set ourselves to act.

Laura Hunter
Escondido

Climate change is not nation’s biggest issue

I wish President Obama would put as much effort into fighting ISIS and keeping our nation safe as he does with the global warming problem. He needs to get his priorities straight.

Steve Aldridge
Ocean Beach

Students are getting the wrong messages

Regarding “Judge historical figures in context of their times” (Dec. 13) by James W. Ingram III: Amazing how progressives can rewrite history by twisting words and half truths, comparing Woodrow Wilson to Abraham Lincoln. Really? How about comparing

George W. Bush to Adolph Hitler? Wait, they did.

No wonder most college students I work with are so conflicted. It seems like a lot of their professors are doing just that.

Fabrice Poignin
Clairmont

No one is asking to take away all of our guns

Who says, “the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed”? (Even disregarding the reason, the “well regulated Militia.”)

I cannot now purchase a fully automatic firearm (a machine gun), a short-barreled rifle or shotgun, a rifle of greater than .50 caliber, or a weapon with a silencer. These are all prohibited under the National Firearms Act.

Now, all we citizens are asking is for the act to be extended to include so-called “assault rifles.”

That’s not too much to ask for, is it?

Al Weiss
San Diego

City created untenable financial problems

Regarding the article “Infrastructure idea moves on” (Dec. 11), I want to comment on this idea of pension “savings.”

The city wants to fund this program half on the backs of the new hires providing city services that the

population wants and depends on, as in library, fire, water services workers, etc. Why can’t the leaders come up with a plan that involves the citizens paying their share of getting this city repaired?

With any luck, Proposition B will get repealed and the city workers can resume a fair and equitable wage and retirement program, not this precarious scheme of no contributions to Social Security and only the Las Vegas-style retirement program called 401 (k).

Barbara Gregg
Scripps Ranch

It is morally wrong to single out immigrants

Regarding “Trump’s Muslim ban idea pushes GOP toward chaos” (Dec. 9): Where are the Christians in our country? Being one, I was taught that one of our purposes on Earth was to help others without caring as to who they were or where they came from. I don’t recall Christ saying only welcome those who think,

act and believe like you.

Jesus Christ accepted everybody. He even accepted sinners. So why are there so many Americans cheering politicians who want to exclude Muslims, Latin American immigrants and Middle Eastern immigrants?

What has happened to us that we are letting hateful rhetoric and fear control how we think and act? It was Franklin Delano Roosevelt who said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Jay Warren
Escondido

Couldn’t we all cut the Chargers a little slack?

Could not at least one U-T sportswriter acknowledge both the yeoman’s work that Mayor Kevin Faulconer and Supervisor Ron Roberts are doing to try to keep the Chargers in San Diego and that Dean Spanos is a very decent San Diego man and citizen?

John W. Tierney
La Jolla

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