

INDEPENDENT VOICES

STEVEN R. VAN HOOK

Betting Bug Invades County

Steven R. Van Hook, born and raised in Santa Barbara, has been a journalist for fifteen years in newspapers and in broadcasting. He is a media consultant living in Lompoc.

Want to make a bet? I'd be willing to wager the majority of readers are going to skip right by this piece without a passing glance on their way to the horoscope or the personal ads. I'd also gamble that if anything captures their eye it will be the above first sentence. The betting bug bores deep into us, like a gold fever infection. The prospect of high gain for little investment is a difficult bewitchment to ignore.

The gambling industry knows and banks on this. Betting is big business. How big? In 1992, Americans spent more on gambling than was spent on books, movies, recorded music, and amusement parks (Disney take note) combined.

Tally receipts from Las Vegas, church bingo, Indian tribe gaming, riverboat casinos, state lotteries, sports bets, dog and horse racing, and other legal wagering in '92, and Americans pony up some \$330 billion in gambling stakes (that's a gain of 1,800 percent since 1976).

Last year, for the first time, more Americans made trips to casinos than they did to major league ballparks. Casino gambling is now allowed in 23 states, and 37 states operate their own

lotteries.

How do the media cover this megaphenomenon? It's a question that must certainly be on the minds of local editors allocating ink to a \$50-million Lotto winner in Lompoc and the flashy new Chumash casino in Santa Ynez.

It's also on the minds of editors at the *Columbia Journalism Review*, which recently ran a piece on how reporters should cover the betting boom—which they call "one of the biggest local stories of the decade." Among some of the problems facing reporters on this story, as explained by the *Review*:

• Reporters are showered with attention by gambling promoters, while informed critics of the industry are very hard to find. Many gambling "experts" are on the gambling industry payroll. "Gambling interests suck up everybody," says one analyst.

• There are few sources to take a moral counter-position, especially given the sizable church and state gambling proceeds from bingo and lotteries.

• Gambling stories don't easily fit within the established beats of most newspapers. The baffling figures and promoter hypebole are enough to confuse even the most seasoned of business reporters.

It's understandably hard to be editorially critical of an industry that promises so much development, so many jobs, so much profit.

Media everywhere run stories of huge Vegas jackpots as straight

news. Television news often treats the state lottery as a breaking story, even announcing lottery results within a newscast (something I refused to do as news director and anchor for an NBC affiliate).

Okay. So words like "morality" and "ethics" and "social awareness" have been coopted by elitist reactionaries. If the ethical and moral questions surrounding gambling are too mushy to address, how about checking out the economic and community toll?

It's well documented that gambling is economically regressive, with poorer people gambling a disproportionate share of their income. The poor grab at a long-shot opportunity to break out of their ensnaring poverty and pay a higher price for it.

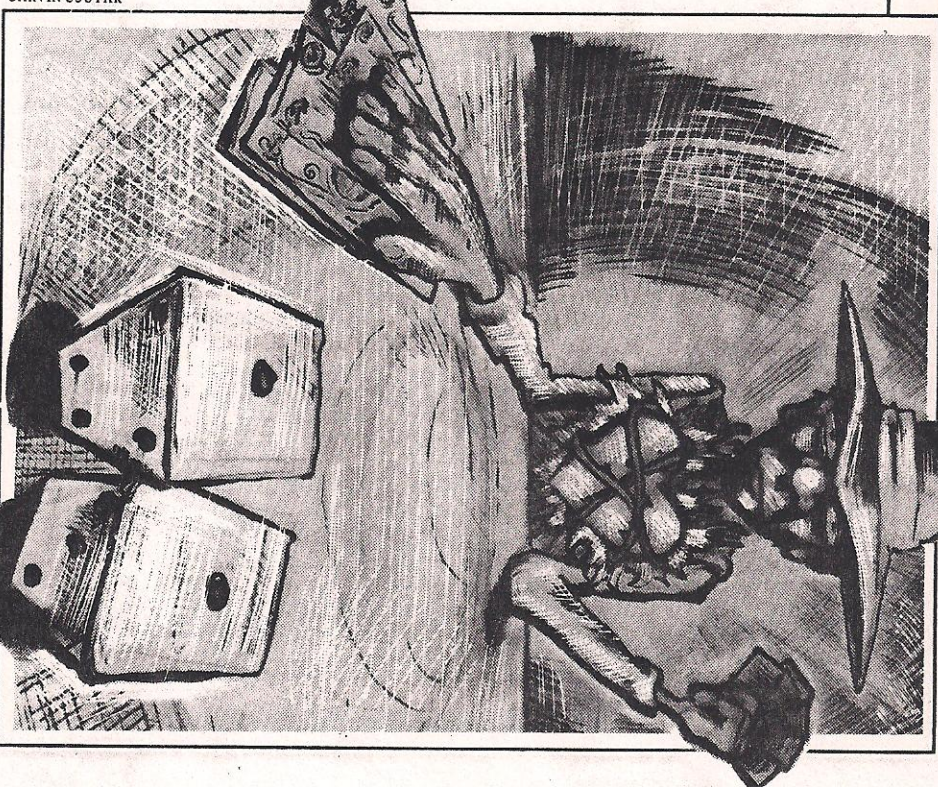
Americans will suffer a record \$35 billion in gambling losses projected for 1995. A Harvard University study shows up to five percent of adults exposed to gambling will likely develop into pathological gamblers (more than eight percent for college and high school students).

In its June issue, *Reader's Digest* chronicles how the town of Deadwood, South Dakota has suffered from skyrocketing crime and bankrupt families since the town turned to gambling as an economic cure-all.

U.S. News & World Report devoted its March 14 cover story, "How Casinos Empty Your Wallet," to the devils of America's "gambling fever."

My files hold many stories on the abuses and shortcomings of the Cali-

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ifornia lottery.

This waning century began in the shadow of the fearsome Marxist motto, "From each according to their ability, to each according to their need" (an ideal apparently incompatible with the human heart). It seems we may begin the millennium's new century under the credo: "The very

few benefit

ing at the expense of the many, and the many acquiescing in hopes of becoming one of the few" (an ideal repugnant to this human's heart).

Are our aspiring hearts to be doomed by our grabbing hands? It's a bet I'd be happy to lose. ■