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In our opinion: Legalizing online betting is a bad wager for Americans

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When New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie signed a bill last week making Internet gambling legal in his state, he struck another blow against the concept of responsible and ethical government, and against the proper way for a nation to work its way out of difficult economic times.

Christie and New Jersey weren't the first to do this. Nevada and Delaware recently had passed laws legalizing online betting. Pressure undoubtedly will mount for others to follow. In each case, state leaders who succumb will talk about the economic benefits that are sure to come rolling into their state. They aren't likely to talk about the costs.

It is significant to remember that, until recently, online gambling was considered a crime in the United States — one which the U.S. Justice Department was actively enforcing. Now, the Obama administration has backed away from that emphasis, and experts are saying state laws allowing Internet gambling probably would remain outside the reach of federal law anyway because they confine the activity to people within that state only. Given the nature of the Internet, it would be wise to take those assurances with a dose of skepticism.

But it may be even more significant to remember that it wasn't too many years ago that general society understood gambling to be a vice — an activity that squandered money, produced nothing of value, destroyed lives and families, and was associated with a host of other vices. Many state constitutions prohibited it. In those days, its practice led to personal tragedies. Today, its embrace and promotion by every state except Utah and Hawaii is a national tragedy and a deviation from the civic responsibility to pay taxes in exchange for the public services people desire.

According to Dailyfinance.com, author and researcher Sam Skolnik said Americans lost more than \$92 billion in legal gambling in 2007, which was nine times the amount lost in 1982. That figure also was nearly 10 times the amount Americans spent to see movies that year. He also said 20 million more people patronized gambling houses — casinos, card rooms or bingo parlors — in 2005 than just five years earlier.

But then the great recession hit. States with legal gambling reacted by telling their residents the answer lay at least partially in more games of chance. Skolnik said 37 states tried to expand gambling in 2009 and '10.

Leslie Bernal, executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling, tries to put this into historical perspective. During the difficult days of World War II, Rosie the Riveter became a symbol of America's resolve to work together to conquer a difficult task, he told us. Today, states erect billboards urging people to spend money on games of chance, with some of them promoting the symbol of a hand with two fingers crossed.

This, Bernal said, legitimizes the idea of wealth without honor. "We've lost the sense that how we earn money matters."

When online gambling becomes legal, people will be able to use smart phones, iPads and home computers as casinos. Technology is available to track a person's location, making sure the gambler resides within a particular state. That's good news for Hawaii and Utah, but it's not reassuring, considering how many ways exist already for people to cloak their identities and locations. The opportunities for under-aged gambling, meanwhile, should be apparent to all.

Opposition to legal gambling is more than just moralizing. The industry adds nothing of value to the economy. It produces no product that can be sold or exported. Instead, it removes billions of hard-earned dollars from people who might otherwise spend or invest those funds in return for things of worth. It preys on people of modest means, lured by dreams of sudden wealth. It devalues hard work and thrift.

What is perhaps more disturbing, however, is how it redefines the relationship between government and the people. The more government relies on gambling revenue, the more it relies on its people to be losers, rather than partners in building a strong nation.

