

This American Gripe

It's mid-December 2012. The digital sign over the highway says, "957 traffic fatalities so far this year. Don't text and drive."

I think, "There's still time to make 1,000 before the New Year."

I don't mean it, of course. People dying on the road is not amusing. Not in the least.

What irks me is the boldness of the scolding, or maybe the irony of it: the message high above me, in shimmering gold lights — my government telling me how I ought to live as it orders another drone strike. We're being watched over with an ever-increasing vigilance these days, Democratic commander-in-chief notwithstanding.

"Photo enforced" intersections are generously scattered throughout the Chicago area, steadfast as an army of stationary robots, sickening as that kid in grade school who always volunteered to be class monitor (the little punk). More and more of the red-light cameras are popping up, daily it seems. I understand that this is for my safety. It's not just a money grab. It's for my own good. Yeah. Right.

And what about seatbelt "stings"? Truly, this is Big Brother with his knee on your chest, anxious to administer an overly enthusiastic (and costly) noogie. The boys in blue are drooling. They point at you as you pass by, thoughtlessly sipping your Dunkin' Donuts coffee, and your stomach instantly does the flip you wish your finger could do. You're nailed. Helpless to protest, you pull over and get in line with the other about-to-be-sheared sheep. So many despicable scofflaws on their way to work — they have it coming, really. Hey, look, they busted Grandma on her way to church — she's so reckless.

Don't even get me started on the fines that can be levied for electronic toll violations. This is an unprecedented misuse of power; it is literally highway robbery!

I understand photo radar is being used in some states. You speed past the machine, it photographs you, your car and plate, and you get a speeding ticket in the mail. Thank you, Satan. We have met the terrorists, and they are our government.

What we really need are some combat drones to patrol our neighborhoods so we can put an end to those filthy, appalling jaywalkers. Hell, let's just nuke 'em. They don't deserve to live.

This in-your-face, robo-justice, violation-by-mail b.s. strikes me as petty, self-righteous and contemptible. It's the state micro-managing the lives of its citizens (let's go ahead and say it, for the exclusive purpose of easy revenue generation) and it makes me wanna toss a fresh cow pie in the face of whoever is to blame for this Orwellian state of affairs.

Quit your cryin', girly-man, I hear you saying. If these are your biggest worries, why don't you just get off your slippery soap box, order a pizza, watch some cable, and appreciate your overprivileged American life? How 'bout you don't text while driving, don't speed, don't run red lights, do pay your tolls, and wear your seatbelt? Then you're safe from your government's heavy-handed wrath, Whiney McWhiner.

Well, your point is taken.

And yet.

It is an American life we're talking about here, isn't it? And last time I heard, I had some rights as a citizen. Including the right to gripe about things that would seem trivial to people (so very many people) who are suffering horribly at the hands of their governments.

I complain about these issues, you see, precisely because I am forced to wonder how long it takes a government to arrive at abuse as it eases down the slippery slope of intrusive practices. As technology allows for greater and greater scrutiny of our daily lives, I have to ask: What's the distance between petty bullying and genuine atrocity? I hope, as 21st century Americans, we don't ever have to know the answer to that question.

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