

Belts or Else

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Paternalism has been defined by Webster as “the principle or practice of an authority in managing or governing the affairs of a country, community, company, or of individuals, in the manner of a father’s relationship with his children.”

One pertinent example of such paternalism is the recently implemented state law allowing law enforcement to stop cars solely on the basis of ticketing drivers for not wearing their seat belts. Before said law, officers could only enforce seat belt laws after stopping drivers for other reasons.

It looks to have been a success – that is if your goal is to rack up more money for government through fining people for doing something that harms no one else but themselves. Hillsborough County, in the first day under the new law, ticketed more than 200 people. Each ticket amounts to \$101 in the county (\$30 from the state and \$71 from court and other county fees).

In a telling statement that hits at the heart of the controversy, Cpl. Ed Raburn told the St. Petersburg Times, “People think we’re like Big Brother, that they should be able to do whatever they want.” Go figure; where would people get such a crazy idea that government should not be regulating individual behavior that doesn’t cause harm to others?

Government, despite its legitimate function of protecting individuals from other individuals who seek to violate their rights, tends to always overreach to the point to where it treats its citizens as children in need of protecting from not just others but from themselves. That is the essence of paternalism: People are too ignorant and irresponsible to make decisions on their own, so we (government) need to force them to make the right decisions. Freedom? Who needs freedom! Oh, and why not profit off of it, too!

Cpl. Raburn also stated, “I’m not going to reach in there and force you to put it on, but if you choose not to, you choose to accept the consequences.” Along those lines, the new campaign is known as “Belts or Else.” It would be interesting to know how much is paid to the people who come up with all of these jingoistic slogans.

The natural consequences of such a bad driving habit have always been potential death or injury in a car crash, but under laws like this the government has found a way to profit off yet another unhealthy and unsafe habit. Add this to helmet laws and cigarette taxes. The attitude seems to be “We don’t like their personal habits, so we’ll make them pay (literally) for them.”

One Florida Highway Patrol captain told the Tallahassee Democrat that the seat belt law represented law enforcement’s efforts in “modifying driver behavior.” Sounds like something your therapist or minister should help you with, not your government.

When one sits down and thinks of all the time and planning done to catch these beltless drivers –

Raburn was in an undercover pickup truck – one wonders if there may be possible unintended consequences to the law, much like there is for many government policies. One driver quoted in Florida Today predicted that: “All this is going to do is cause more people to get suspended licenses because they can't pay the fines. It just means more people in jail.”

With all of the problems facing individuals in this sluggish economy, the last thing people need is their own government forcing them to pay a hefty fine for something many believe it has no business enforcing. And many are frustrated because they view this law, and others which seek to protect people from themselves, as an inappropriate breach of government authority and a waste of tax dollars.

When enforcing seat belt use with minors paternalism is appropriate; after all, they are children. But paternalism on the part of government toward non-minors, treating adults as if they were children, is both a misstep on the part of government and not-so-subtle insult to the intelligence of drivers.