

Public Safety and the Egg McMuffin

by Bill Mason (*May 1994*)

Seat belts. Guns. Tobacco. Can popcorn and eggs be far behind?

Probably not. In its quest to protect us from ourselves, there is no end to government. It may be only a matter of time before we pick up our morning newspapers to read a front-page story about a standoff between police and a man who refuses to pay his Egg McMuffin ticket.

Wait just a minute! That's quite a stretch!

Perhaps. But consider what we've already seen.

It began with a crusade to make safer cars — a good idea that led to federally-mandated seat belts in every car that came off an assembly line. It ended with state legislatures requiring people in automobiles to wear those safety belts and the imposition of heavy fines for offenders who don't comply. Public safety was the issue: Proponents of such laws argued that too many people were dying or suffering serious injury because seat belts often went unused, and the rest of us ended up paying the bill.

More recently, California passed legislation requiring bicycle riders to wear safety helmets — and a tax-supported fund was created to help those who cannot afford one. Again, the issue was public safety.

The current debate over guns also revolves around public safety, and President Clinton has taken the lead by repeatedly referring to the debate as a primary *health-care* issue, thereby expanding the scope of concern. According to the Department of Justice, there were 23,760 murders in the United States during 1992 — 13,200 of which involved firearms. The solution, of course, is to register firearms, or at least impose a waiting period between the time of purchase and delivery so potential buyers can be scrutinized.

One can only hope that criminals, given their obvious concern for public safety and health, will take the time to legally purchase their weapons before committing crimes.

Now it's tobacco's turn. Warning labels and massive campaigns to educate the public are no longer enough.

Many restaurants and other businesses face serious penalties unless they cater to nonsmokers, even to the exclusion of those who choose to smoke. Voting with one's pocketbook or feet — an American tradition whose value is proven — has lost its appeal. The marketplace is slowly being gobbled up by bureaucrats whose paternal instincts are boundless.

More astonishing is the Food and Drug Administration's expressed desire to regulate nicotine as a drug, thus giving its bureaucrats the power to tightly regulate the sale of cigarettes — a goal that has received public support from members of Congress and U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders.

Proponents of more stringent regulations on the tobacco industry, and the use of its products, routinely cite health statistics to bolster their arguments. They even draw parallels between firearms and tobacco. If that's not enough, proponents are certain to remind the uneducated that nicotine is highly addictive. Of course, they will likely omit the fact that millions of people cannot start the day without a cup of coffee, nor will they dwell on the very real health-risks associated with caffeine.

Popcorn is next on the list, and the theater experience will never be the same ... too bad. Although Coconut oil may not be a health food, it does make great popcorn. Margarine could be considered as an alternative, but a just-released report out of Harvard notes that a little-known fat in margarine may be responsible for 30,000 of the nation's annual heart-disease deaths. Oh well — so much for good taste.

Meanwhile, some consumer groups have raised the battle flag, and the offending popcorn is already disappearing from many theaters. It's almost certain that Congress will next hold hearings on coconut oil and those evil manufacturers who sold the stuff — all in the name of public health and safety. And why not?

Increasingly, legislatures and government agencies are descending upon the public with schemes to reduce the risks associated with living. In the process, these same entities almost always restrict behavior in some new fashion — even when individuals should be responsible for making their own choices. Public safety and health are often the arguments used to justify such acts.

We must protect people from themselves, the story goes, even when they don't want to be protected. Why? Because we care. Besides, there are economic consequences associated with certain uses of these products — consequences borne by the entire country.

Fine:

Eggs have cholesterol. Cholesterol contributes to heart disease. Heart disease is the number one killer in the United States — and it kills far more people than tobacco, guns, and automobiles combined. And like tobacco, guns, and automobiles, the use of eggs and other fat-and-cholesterol-ridden foods is a matter of choice.

If the state can force us to buckle up in the name of public safety and health, then the state can regulate our use of fat and cholesterol. Granted, using tobacco, guns, and automobiles sometimes involves others — and when they are used to commit a crime, the offender must be punished. But unless we plan to prepare our own meals the next time we dine out or visit a fast-food restaurant, we had better

learn to accept reality: The behavior of others will always impact our lives; that's just the way life works.

And that brings us to the man with the Egg McMuffin ticket. Having consumed his annual quota of fat and cholesterol, he bought his fast-food breakfast on the black market. When he was pulled over because of his car's broken taillight, the officer noticed the man trying to hide his purchase. When the man couldn't produce a valid receipt, he was cited for illegal possession of an Egg McMuffin. Naturally, he refused to pay the fine.

As for the rest of us, it might be a good idea to check the tail-lights on the car. Of course, one can choose to ignore a faulty tail-light. That's okay; even *if* you do get a fix-it ticket, a trip to the auto parts department will solve your problem — and you'll not even have to pay the fine.

Just don't get caught with an undocumented Egg McMuffin. ■

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