

Opinion

Gulf Breeze NEWS



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Are red-light cameras a sign of the coming surveillance state?

"There was, of course, no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and except in darkness, every movement scrutinized." –George Orwell, 1984

The renowned media analyst Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase "the medium is the message." His point was that emerging technologies do more than facilitate processes—they impact us on a deeper level by altering how we think and act.

This brings us to the debate currently underway over the use of red-light surveillance cameras at traffic intersections as a way to discourage drivers from running red lights.

First, there is the safety issue. Considering that more than 850 people die and about 170,000 are injured yearly in accidents relating to drivers running red lights, improving driver safety is a weighty concern.

While some studies suggest that rear-end crashes rise, at least temporarily, when traffic cameras are installed, deadly side-impact crashes decline. And two new studies suggest that the surveillance cameras, when properly implemented, may be an effective way to curtail red-light running. For instance, one of the studies found that violations dropped by 36 percent after yellow lights were extended to give drivers more warning that the light was about to turn red. After red-light cameras were added, remaining violations dropped by 96 percent.

Second is a concern about how money generated from the cameras will be used. Critics contend that these red-light cameras could become money-generating traps, "cash machines for money-hungry local budgets." There is certainly money to be made. For example, in just the first six years after installing red-light cameras in the nation's capital, the District of Columbia generated \$32 million in fines.

Third is a concern about potential abuse since state and local governments aren't the only ones that will profit. As one

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— John W. Whitehead

Founder and president of The Rutherford Institute

VIEWPOINT

By John W. Whitehead

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commentator explains, "The manufacturers of red-light and speed cameras typically sell their equipment to cities and receive a large percentage of the revenue from each ticket, creating a billion-dollar industry."

Eric Skrum, Communications Director for the National Motorists Association, has suggested that Lockheed Martin, one of the largest government contractors in the country and one of the biggest manufacturers of red-light cameras in the U.S., has a vested interest in red-light fines since "the company doesn't get paid unless a ticket is issued."

Fourth is a concern about the appeals process. The absence of human involvement – a police officer who witnesses a violation and investigates before issuing a ticket – is one factor. The cameras are not infallible. For example, approximately 13,000 drivers received tickets by cameras located at one particular Washington, D.C. intersection—the only problem: they weren't guilty because the red-light cameras at the particular intersection were wrongly positioned. Another factor is cost. According to the Washington Post, "Regina Williams, a DMV spokeswoman, said those who appeal their tickets also have to pay a \$10 appeal fee and \$10 for each page of any hearing transcript, both nonrefundable. In addition, motorists must pay the fine until the appeal is resolved, which usually takes two months."

A final concern is that Americans are increasingly having to prove their innocence as the traditional standard of crimi-

nal justice – you're innocent until proven guilty – is nullified.

We all want safer roads—and that starts with safer drivers. If red-light cameras are an effective solution, that's fine. However, it wouldn't hurt for communities to put some other safety checks in place such as extending the duration of yellow lights to give drivers more warning; ensuring that red-light cameras are only snapping photos and not carrying out constant video surveillance; making the appeals process more accessible by reducing or eliminating altogether any fees involved in challenging a signal ticket; and structuring the system in such a way that the fines pay for the cost of the system, rather than creating a profit-raising revenue stream for the government and its contractors.

On a more philosophical note, before we travel too far down the slippery slope of embracing a surveillance state, we should ask ourselves: If surveillance devices are the "medium," whether we're talking about red-light cameras at traffic intersections, surveillance cameras in parks and sidewalks or monitoring of our telephone calls and emails, then what is the message? Although stop-light cameras are probably the least invasive of these devices, the undeniable message being communicated is that we're constantly being watched, tracked and cataloged.

Any expectation of privacy will eventually go down the drain, and with it any sense of true freedom.

Constitutional attorney and author John W. Whitehead is founder and president of The Rutherford Institute. He can be contacted at johnw@rutherford.org. Information about the Institute is available at www.rutherford.org.

On the Spot:



WHERE WE PUT PEOPLE "ON THE SPOT" TO ANSWER A QUESTION "ON THE SPOT."

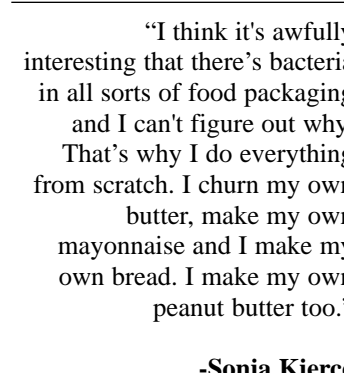
By Franklin Hayes

What do think about reports of salmonella contaminating certain brands of peanut butter?



"That's what's happening to my cousin right now in Washington, D.C. At first they told her she had a cyst on her liver, then they said she had ulcers. She went home and heard about it on the news and she had the Peter Pan peanut butter that had the lot number and it was half empty. It now makes sense why she has been sick for the last two weeks."

-Rodney Scott
 Pensacola



"I think it's awfully interesting that there's bacteria in all sorts of food packaging and I can't figure out why. That's why I do everything from scratch. I churn my own butter, make my own mayonnaise and I make my own bread. I make my own peanut butter too."

-Sonia Kierce
 Gulf Breeze



"It's probably people not doing their jobs right."

-Logan Dean
 Pensacola



"It's interesting that you hear that Great Value is a Wal-Mart product and it's made at the same factory. It seems odd after the spinach thing happened first. It's odd that there's been a lot of food poisonings going on lately."

-Nik McCue
 Pensacola



Railroads fixed since Katrina, rail schedule still not announced

The nonprofit Florida Coalition of Rail Passengers is urging residents of the Gulf Breeze area to contact Amtrak's new President, Alexander Kummant, and their elected officials in Washington to request immediate resumption of Amtrak service to Northwest Florida.

Until Hurricane Katrina, Amtrak service linked Pensacola, Tallahassee, Crestview, Madison, Chipley, Lake City, Jacksonville and surrounding areas to other cities in Florida, Alabama, coastal Mississippi, New Orleans and points west. The train service was greatly important to

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tourism and commerce in many of these locales.

Hurricane Katrina passed through the upper Gulf Coast states many months ago now. But despite the fact that hurricane-damaged railroad tracks, signals and bridges have long been restored along this route, Amtrak has yet to announce a date when train service will resume between New Orleans and Florida.

Amtrak President Kummant

can be contacted by writing Amtrak, 60 Massachusetts Avenue, NE; Washington, DC 20002. Please tell him and Congress that the cities and towns along this route have waited patiently long enough since Katrina. Amtrak service should return to the Florida Panhandle immediately.

Sincerely yours,

Jackson McQuigg
 President,
 Florida Coalition of Rail Passengers

Fundraiser thanks Gulf Breeze

My name is MaryEllen Wooten and I live in

Charlottesville, Va. I have a very small non-profit www.fromustoyou.us I send care packages to our Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan to express our gratitude for their service to our nation as well as to lift morale. I sent out a letter to my email contacts asking for support with our Christmas drive. By way of a friend of a friend, my email landed in Gulf Breeze. Mr. Tony Hess helped me network and pass the word. I am so PROUD of your community, as well as filled with gratitude with the response I received. The ending tally was \$790! WOO-HOO!

Truly, I am in awe that so many wonderful strangers have

supported my efforts. Don't know that I will ever get to visit Gulf Breeze to meet any of you to thank you in person, but please accept my most sincere appreciation for being true Americans and supporting our troops in harm's way.

The American Spirit is alive and well in Gulf Breeze. Many soldiers and Marines will receive care packages filled with love from the town of Gulf Breeze. I thank you and our troops thank you.

God Bless You All

MaryEllen Wooten
 Director
 www.fromustoyou.us