

## THE THERAPEUTIC STATE

P. J. O'ROURKE

### Safety Nazis

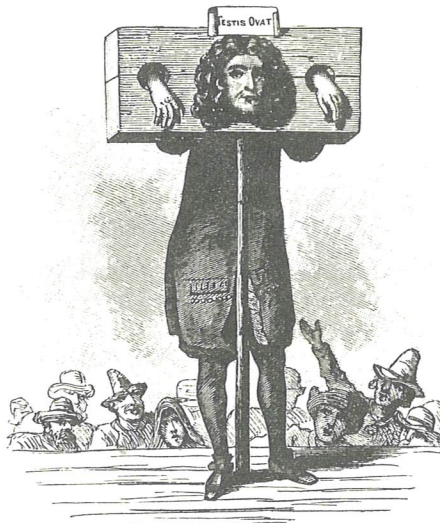
**P**RESIDENT REAGAN HAS grappled with myriad threats to the American way and tossed no few of them. The pork-and-dove barrel in Congress has been silenced. An emetic has been applied to a pair of Libyan warplanes. The air traffic controllers have been sent to bed without their, or anyone in their family's, supper. A truly amusing number of muck-a-mucks in Iran are making like Redstone rockets in the old Vanguard satellite program (a phenomenon every red-blooded patriot assumes is the work of the CIA). And something has even been done about that tired observation, "the poor are always with us"—what with the end of busing and affirmative action, the poor will be, I presume, mostly with each other.

But there is one menace to Western civilization, one assault on the free world, one threat to everything we value, which the president has yet to confront. I speak of the childproof bottle top. Now a childproof bottle top is a fine thing for a child who has no job or other weighty responsibilities in life and can spend all day mastering the technique of opening bleach and cleaning-fluid containers (a leisure pursuit much in favor with children—as anyone can attest who has watched a three-year-old tackle the cap on a pint of bug poison with the precision of a pre-Seiko Swiss watchmaker). But an aspirin bottle equipped with such a device is a Gordian knot to a hung-over adult. Consequently our nation is weakened. Life is filled with pain and sorrow; which fact cannot fail to touch the heart of any perceptive American. Therefore no U.S. citizen with an IQ

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over 110 is sober after six in the evening. Yet we have allowed our country's most effective headache cure to be sealed like the tomb of Amenhotep IV. How can our elite confront Soviet aggression, lower interest rates without fueling inflation, and draft a viable Law of the Sea treaty when their skulls are throbbing to the tune of the sound track for *Zulu Dawn*? Allen Ginsberg said he saw the best minds of his generation destroyed by madness. I have seen the best minds of my generation destroy a half gross of Tylenol with a ball peen hammer.

There's an easy solution to this. Place all dangerous household substances out of reach in a crib or playpen and put the children under the



sink. But childproof bottle tops are, in fact, only one aspect of a much larger problem. I was depressed the other week and did not know why. My finances were in no more than normal disarray. The girlfriend and I weren't getting along any worse than usual. I was not under indictment for any felony I could think of. Still, I was blue. Days passed before I realized what was the matter: My car was nagging me.

I don't like seatbelts. They make me feel like an eighteenth-century sea captain. If the car is going to have a wreck, that's its business. I will not be compelled to stay aboard. Yet each time I demur at fastening this contrivance the car lets out a horrid electron-

ic scold. And this sound is as nothing compared to the shriek when I open a door with the key left in the ignition. Other rude noises and annoying blinkers are rigged to let me know if I do anything else potentially detrimental to my well-being. Some newer-model automobiles actually have prerecorded voices that speak about one's feckless habits in the tone used by wives during NFL playoffs. I'm told this is the wave of the future. I predict mayhem. All the pent-up hatreds that produce those household slaughters—husbands, driven mad by continuous domestic friction, murder spouse and offspring and hold police at bay for hours—will now be directed at the family car. Once too often the Malibu Classic will inform a drunken gun nut that his trunk lid is ajar—and pow! This is a serious matter. A new family can be had free through various charitable organizations, but a car costs \$8000.

Still, something even worse has happened to automobiles than their new-found disposition to whine and bitch. They have become boring and abstruse—rounded about with lumpy bumpers and Targa bars, and, under the hood, resembling the back of an Atari game. For those readers too young to remember, a car used to be a simple piece of machinery, something like a very fast rider-mower but better because you couldn't mow the lawn with it. You started this up, drove off at pretty much any speed you desired, and then exercised a variety of constitutionally guaranteed liberties—usually by having sex and accidents. No more. Nowadays if a car cannot survive a drop from the Gateway Arch or it emits any vapors more noxious than Evening in Paris, the federal government won't let you own it, and what it will let you own you can't really drive because 55 mph is the speed at which a spirited person parallel parks.

Medicines that come practically locked in a Brinks truck, electronically admonishing automobiles, speed limits prudent to the point of cowardice—there is surely a pattern to these annoyances. I purchased a wood-splitting maul not long ago. Pasted on the head was a lurid sticker instructing me to cover my eyes when doing anything untoward; attached to the handle was a pair of nasty plastic goggles, painfully uncomfortable to wear and producing that view of the world we call "fish-eyed" (though if fish really did have eyes like that we would be



able to get them with baseball bats instead of expensive fly rods). A box of shotgun shells now devotes three full flaps to caveats advising against almost every conceivable kind of shooting activity and stopping just short of warning you not to own a gun at all. And the daily newspaper, once replete with tales of exciting fire and police department action, political scandal, and international donnybrooks, is now filled with items about untidiness at toxic-chemical dumps, hazardous toaster recalls, and the cancer-causing properties of everything good on earth.

**S**OMETHING IS HAPPENING to America, not something dangerous but something all too safe. I see it in my lifelong friends. I am a child of the "baby boom," a genera-

tion not known for its sane or cautious approach to things. Yet suddenly my peers are giving up drinking, giving up smoking, and cutting down on coffee, sugar, and salt. They will not eat red meat, and they now go to restaurants whose menus have inspired me to stand on a chair yelling, "Floppy, Moppsy, Cotton-tail, dinner is served!" This from the generation of LSD, Weather Underground, and Altamont! And all in the name of safety! Our nation has withstood many divisions: north and south, black and white, labor and management; but I do not know if the country can survive division into smoking and nonsmoking sections.

As once anything was excusable in the name of patriotism, now anything is excusable in the name of safety. We will kiss some low place on every dish-towel-head in the Levant rather than have a single breeder reactor on our shores. We will make every lube artist in America learn Japanese rather than produce an enjoyable automobile. This is treason. America was founded on danger. How many lifeboat drills

were held on the Mayflower? Where were the smoke detectors in the Lincoln family cabin? Who checked to see whether Indian war paint was made with red dye No. 2? It was the thrilling, vast, wonderful danger of America that drew people here from all over the world—spacious skies filled with blizzards and tornadoes, purpled mountain majesties to fall off, and fruited plains full of snarling animals and armed aborigines. America is a dangerous country. Safety has no place here.

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live and safe. It's very safe to be an inanimate object, but the carbon molecules who were our ancestors chose otherwise, and having once set upon a course of devouring things, we must submit to having other things occasionally attempt to devour us. This is painful, but pain is an important part of existence. No amount of hazard warnings on the back of our hand would keep us from thrusting it into a lion's mouth if that didn't hurt. Lions, admittedly, are in short supply, but the same holds true for whirling Cuisinart blades and oil-burning space heaters.

Pain is the body's way of showing us we're boneheads. A child growing up in an excessively safe environment may never learn that he is one—not until he gets married and has a wife to tell him so. (And the world goes hard on single people, who are under the impression they are cool.) Nor can death be avoided. Death is even more important than pain. Death was invented so we could have evolution. The process of Darwinian selection does not work on things that don't die.

If it weren't for death we would all still be amoebas and would have to eat by surrounding things with our butts. Also, a lack of death would result in an extraordinary number of old people, and the social-security system is already overextended.

Therefore it is the duty of every patriotic, moral, and humanistic person among us to smoke, drink, drive like hell, shoot guns, own Pintos, take saccharin, leave unmarked medicine bottles open all over the house, get in fist fights, start barbecue fires with gasoline, put dry-cleaner bags over his or her head, and run around barefoot without getting a tetanus shot.

But I don't know how long we will be able to continue like this. The forces of safety are afoot in the land. I, for one, believe it is a conspiracy—a conspiracy of Safety Nazis shouting *Sieg Health!* and seeking to trammel freedom, liberty, and large noisy parties. The Safety Nazis advocate gun control, vigorous exercise, and health foods. The result can only be a disarmed, exhausted, and half-starved population ready to acquiesce to dictatorship of some kind. I do not know what the ultimate aims of the Safety Nazis are, but the prevalence of flameproof infant sleepwear argues that a totalitarian force is looking to use my children someday as fireplace tongs. Other than that, however, it will probably be a very safe dictatorship without the dive bombers, tanks, and huge artillery that are the only fun things about totalitarianism.

President Reagan has shown some promise of standing up to the Safety Nazis. James Watt is as dangerous a secretary of the interior as we've had in a long time. And at least a few of the safetyist regulatory excesses of the Carter years have been revoked—the requirement that all full-sized sedans carry a blimp under the dashboard, for instance. But as yet there is little indication that the president perceives the true lack of danger our country faces. Maybe this is because he has had the experience of being shot. That's fine for him. *His* life is plenty dangerous. But what about the rest of us, the common people crying out for hazard and risk? I hope President Reagan keeps us in mind as he trims the federal budget. The MX missile system looks like a perilous thing, but, if that proves too expensive, he could grant a small increase in Amtrak funding and perhaps we could all die in a horrible train wreck. □