

# WARNING: This Column May Be Hazardous

BY TIM ROWLAND

**W**hile filling up my truck at the local Sheetz, I decided to read the list of bulleted warnings on the side of the pump. A lot of it was boilerplate, no-smoking stuff, but one message popped out: “Do not point nozzle toward face.”

Alarmed, I pulled the nozzle away from my eyeball. I guess I’ll never know what the inside of a gas hose looks like. Thank heaven for warnings. I could have been seriously hurt.

Ah, for the days when the only scolds were Susan Spotless and Smokey Bear, and the government only stepped in to regulate safety when too many hog dressers were falling into vats of boiling lard. Today we have so many public warnings and safety dragnets that it seems we must face an Inquisition’s worth of risk with every step we take. Does all this mothering make us safer, healthier, and smarter?

The admonishments began with the forerunner of the Ad Council during World War II, which harmlessly implored folks to buy war bonds. But once the war was over, what were federal workers to do? Of course, they soon found all sorts of things, and before long we had Indians crying over mounds of trash and talking dogs telling us to take a bite out of crime.

In a wondrous, eight-year span beginning in 1966, agencies such as the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, and the Consumer Product Safety Commission arrived on the scene. All have done their best to duct tape us in bubble wrap. Well-intentioned perhaps, but is it such a good thing for Washington bureaucrats to try to warn and protect us from all possible harm?

In the 1970s, the CPSC wrote regulations outlawing “protrusions” aft of the handlebars on bicycles that, strictly read, prohibited bikes from having seats. And of course, one construction worker who forgets his hard hat can all but put a small contractor out of business.

Have all of these warnings and regulatory agencies had much effect? The numbers don’t show it. We have, until recently, gotten generally safer and safer over the past 80 years, but there was



no shift in the safety curve following, say, the creation of OSHA or the mandate for airbags.

How could that be? One explanation is that “safer” machinery and environments cause people to become complacent and take more chances. A sports car might have tighter, safer suspension, but that only encourages drivers to push it harder through the curves. (UCLA economist Armen Alchian once noted that highway fatalities would decline if airbags were to be replaced with spear points.) And as Shawn Regan argues (p. 5), lifesaving GPS technology has only encouraged

wilderness hikers to take more, in some cases stupid, chances.

That’s not to say that people don’t value safety and aren’t willing to pay for it. In the marketplace, safety sells. Just ask Volvo. Without an impeccable reputation for safety, no one would buy such an ugly car. And Michelin moves plenty of product with its ads featuring a gurgling infant and the implicit message, “Buy our tires or your babies will be killed.”

In egregious cases — the exploding Pinto comes to mind — government may indeed have to step in with safety codes. But agencies that write safety regulations always feel the need to write more safety regulations, even if it’s more about justifying their jobs than it is about protecting the consumer. (If I could find the guy who required riding mower engines to cut off when the driver hops off the seat, I would go after him with a machete.)

A mandated warning can be useful when people may fail to notice a risk. But nowadays it seems those yellow and black labels carpet everything. Do people take the time to read them anymore? Worse, warnings and regulations can lull the public into a false sense of security. If it doesn’t say not to stick your fingers into the fan blade, does that mean it’s OK to do so?

A risk-free world is not only costly, it’s also impossible. And risk does have its place. An average day should not include running a gauntlet of dangers, but neither should we hermetically seal ourselves into our homes.

Depending on ourselves has always been more fun than depending on Mom — or the government. So go ahead and look in the gas nozzle. But if you get hurt, it’s your own fault. **R**

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