

Oops...

by Joe Holzer

Part of my living is made by properly identifying causality in problem solving, and creatively defining means to circumvent said issue. As an engineer, I consider it both a necessary skill and an apparently scarce attribute, if some news reports and observations lately are to be believed. I also am a complainer; not a mere whiner, which seems to be relatively widespread, but a person who is simply not satisfied with whatever is status quo. I make a hobby of turning over perfectly stable rocks to see what lies beneath them, and if you dear readers of my diatribes (those who haven't simply used my column as a means to bottom birdcages) will permit me, I would like to take you on a journey of the mind. Try to remember the early Saturday Night Live repartee between Chevy Chase and the hard of hearing little old lady played by the late Gilda Radner, who responded to Chevy's correcting her on a gross misinterpretation which led to her having a tirade with "... Never Mind"...

One of the cable networks recently ran a documentary (so-called because it represents someone's interpretation of fact, as opposed to empirical evidence, and is therefore to be taken with the requisite grain of sodium chloride) on the life of George Wallace. For those too young to remember, this former Governor of Alabama was a staunch supporter of segregation, and achieved national fame when he blocked two negro students from enrolling at the state university, in defiance of their Kennedy-backed, and federally required, de-segregation mandate.

Let me for the record at this point state emphatically that I am by no means politically correct, and my politics tend to the Libertarian view, though that is still a categorical definition I resent. A more accurate definition would describe me as a basic constitutionalist, with a strong leaning towards interpretation thereof in a way which allows any and every person the opportunity to maximize their personal benefit from their existence and efforts. It should take no genius to see this would imply disapproval of any segregation form and any wealth redistribution scheme. The fly in most of this ointment is that a society must have some some rules by which such interpretation by all would nonetheless allow for compromises in the name of the societal greater good. I reconcile this divergence with the belief that my personal benefit is only capable of being ascertained in the very long term, and that membership in that society is one of those benefits; ergo that cost. When viewed from a global perspective, that seems to be the most DEMOCRATIC interpretation, with specific disavowal of association with any similarly named political party.

In that spirit, the transformation of Mr. Wallace over his political career, and his summary public apology for his earlier support of segregation, show him in my book to have been an honorable human being who acknowledged his mistakes when empirical evidence showed his earlier beliefs were flawed.

When Congress took up the debate before removing the federally defined and imposed National Maximum Speed Limit, NMSL, the religious followers of Ralph Nader, who had exercised the power of control over the preceding thirty years of draconian enforcement of that same limit, predicted there would be a resultant 6900 added annual deaths. Instead, the fatality rate has DECLINED. Their assertion was based on the originally observed EMPIRICAL data which showed a substantial decline in fatalities in 1974 after imposition of the NMSL by Richard Nixon as a means of increasing public awareness of one means to address the oil crisis of the time. Any engineer can tell you that drag increases with speed, and therefore a reduced speed will result in lower consumption of fuel, all other things being equal.

But that is precisely the point. All other things most definitely were NOT equal. Fuel supplies were nonexistent after dark, the primary killing time, and people curtailed unnecessary travel and PAYED CLOSE ATTENTION to what they

were doing while they were driving. But the contributions of these other factors to the fatality rate were continually ignored or denied by policy makers, police, revenueurs and insurance companies, as people such as Joan Claybrook, former head of NHTSA, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, forced her dogmatic rhetoric on the populace, despite their voting to the contrary with their respective right feet.

This is where the term democracy must be explained - it means that decisions will be made and implemented on the basis of a consensus by the majority of those affected. But such an interpretation can be subjected to some severe abuse. Take for example the population of New York City deciding the highway speeds in Montana. Clearly, those who CAN only use mass transit have no ability whatsoever to determine the appropriateness of such choices for those who are separated by multiple miles of open countryside. And each enforcement of such "one size fits all" interpretations led to greater resentment of governmental intrusion on a personal level. Coupled with the abuse of power from Viet Nam thru Watergate and into the S&L scandal, you can readily trace the causality of "road rage", the drug market, escapism and the kind of violence recently perpetrated against symbols of authority. It also takes no leap to see similar roots in denial of personal responsibility and the "blameless society", and the growth of cynicism. (Does any of you think I might be so afflicted?)

I happen at this time (Aug - Sept) to be working on Cape Cod (life's tough). For a variety of reasons the best place for my motorhome to stay is in Eastham, about 40 miles east of the plant in Hyannis. Each day, that requires me to drive with all that traffic on Rt. 6, which has twenty miles on the eastern end of no-passing double lane road. Unlike the Adirondacks, where a similar stretch is simply IMPOSSIBLE to pass because of short sight lines, this beast is practically straight. It has seemingly been prevented from becoming a divided four lane due to some wetlands bird or another. Who knows, but I'll bet the birds are a lot more pragmatic than we seem. They understand that Cape Cod is no more nor less than a temporary sand bar, and one good natural "disaster" is all that will be required to remove it as easily as it got there, so they sit on our puny telephone wires and laugh at us. But if you are looking for a metaphor for the stupid arrogance of speed enforcement, there seems no better example. About every two miles is a "rest area", always empty, and there is almost always at least one speed trap along this stretch. So those who feel they have paid enough taxes, thank you, will drive at the posted limit of 50, or slightly below. Let's momentarily examine a truism; the slowest vehicle on the road will eventually become the fastest vehicle at the head of a line, and from that point on, no added vehicle can merge without further reducing the speed of every one of those behind to accommodate the adder. Now, clearly it is possible that some of these adders are going to depart, but the nature of a main artery is that most traffic will expect to go longer distances, so the load usually is continually increasing. Eventually, you get to the point where huge expanses of the road are unpopulated, and only a small percentage can even get to the posted speed limit, a certain means to deprive the most people from ability to access the pleasures (!) of Cape Cod. Like the Sierra Club insisting on Yellowstone being accessible only to backpackers, you design systems so only an elite have access; in this case only those with TIME to waste. So much for democracy.

I do not see how this situation, with cars in very close proximity, driven by bored and frustrated drivers, can be interpreted to be more safe than an open road where the vast majority of people will simply drive at the speed at which THEY feel comfortable. Does THAT sound anything like democratic thinking? Instead of artificial speed limits, there should be instructions, like on the track, to CHECK YOUR MIRRORS; If someone is behind but not ahead, speed up or pull into the rest area and let them by. I won't hold my breath waiting for this enlightened wisdom to be implemented. And the real reason? After unjustly criminalizing a huge number of users of highways, spending and collecting untold BILLIONS of dollars in fines and increased insurance premiums, and wasting the TIME of all those citizens, not one of those zealots has the guts to admit they were wrong. So we continue to perpetrate a burden based on a flawed premise which has never been subjected to critical review, and required to justify or perish. And when it comes to culpability,

dear old Joan had a LOT more direct contribution to the decapitation of infants with airbags than any of my driving rapidly will have to do with the simplistic “speed kills” at predicting my ultimate demise. Do you feel safer in traffic at 50, or by yourself at 90? Think your senses are lying to you? How about THEM? I’ll take George Wallace over Ralph Nader any day.