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## Essay: Are Red-Light Runners Trying to Get a Power-Fix?

"Outa my way—it's red, let's floor it!"

News item: *San Jose Mercury News*: Baby Dies in Collision after Mother Runs Red Light

Red-light running seems to have become the national game of chicken in recent years. In utter arrogance and disrespect of other drivers, the red-light runner's attitude is, "I dare you to catch me." And while sitting at a green light waiting as one to three cars go whizzing through the intersection against a red light, I've actually been flipped off by some of them, as if to say, "Ha. I screwed you, sucker!"

This type of driving attitude used to be limited to your average, hormone-raging male teen. But within the last 5-10 years, the faces of red-light runners have changed. They now reflect a broad cross-section of society: from teens with an attitude to little old ladies with cats. What used to occur fairly infrequently has escalated into the norm.

This deadly serious problem has caught the attention of Washington politicians. Transportation Secretary Federico Pena announced in 1995 that San Francisco and Sacramento were among 32 communities scheduled to receive a total of \$600,000 in federal highway funds to set up enforcement and education programs in an effort to crack down on red-light runners. "Twenty-two percent of accidents in cities are caused by people who run a red light. It costs the country \$7 billion a year," says Pena, citing statistics from a 1995 federal study. Part of the money could be spent on electronic surveillance equipment, like the cameras installed at key intersections in San Francisco in 1996.

The city of Fremont followed San Francisco's example, entering into an agreement with U.S. Public Technologies Inc. to install the high-tech cameras to catch red-light runners. Fremont has fewer traffic accidents than a densely populated city such as San Francisco. However, Fremont officials became alarmed at the increasing volume of accidents caused by red-light runners. From 1994 through December 1995, drivers running red lights caused 295 accidents, 48 percent resulting in injuries. In 1994, a woman ran a red light and hit a small school bus, causing multiple injuries to several children, and two intersection deaths were attributed to red-light runners as of July, 1996. San Francisco made the decision to install cameras after a man ran a red light, lost control of his car, and plowed into 19 people waiting for a streetcar on 19th Avenue.

There was a time when motorists slowed down on a yellow light and stopped on red. There was a time when they used turn signals to indicate an intention to change lanes or to turn. Now, only Edith Bunker or a dullard would use turn signals to indicate a lane change. Fellow drivers interpret the flashing light as a warning to speed up and prevent the driver from "cutting in." Now, when needing to change lanes, you must appear nonchalant while glancing surreptitiously into the rear and side-view mirrors. Then, glancing over your shoulder and seeing a chance, you must quickly dart over into the next lane—pulling a surprise move on the drivers beside you. Even when always being extra cautious to pull off this move with plenty of time and room to spare, you may still receive a middle-finger salute from the driver now behind you. But unfortunately, if you use your turn signal, you'd be waiting for the next two miles trying to move over since drivers in the next lane would speed up to prevent you from moving over in front of them. Why? What has changed? Where have these kinds of rude and possessive attitudes come from?

Sometime between "Leave It to Beaver" and "Beavis and Butthead," and somewhere between dinner with "Donna Reed" and "Roseanne" the seeds of our rude attitudes were planted. They took root somewhere between leaving Eve Arden's classroom and entering Cotter's. And, sometime between the decade of the flower children and the advent of the Mac, America lost her innocence. The sexual revolution seems to

coincide with the explosive expansion of Silicon Valley and the technical revolution—and the subsequent quickening tempo of our lives. Today, we find ourselves too stressed and out of time for spontaneous visits with friends or even extended vacations. Instead of making casual, unannounced calls to see friends, we now must make appointments well in advance. Every minute is planned—gulping down dinner, rushing the kids somewhere or picking them up, or dashing off to some prearranged function, usually arriving late.

Sandy Dornbusch, a professor of human biology, education and sociology at Stanford University, comments in a San Jose Mercury News article, "Rude Awakening: Peninsulans Miss Manners as Boorishness Becomes Norm," that "public rudeness has increased dramatically" (1). As the pace of our lives has sped up to a warp 10, we've retreated into ourselves, becoming insulated little bundles of energy, rushing madly through the world. As we rush about, we lack the patience for civility.

American life seems to be undergoing a social redefinition. We live now in a society which no longer follows a strict code of behavior. Our mothers and grandmothers used to admonish our bad behavior with, "What will the neighbors think?" But now we no longer have neighbors we know or care much about. Today, the average person moves every five years. This transitory lifestyle weakens, even destroys, bonds with other people—not only with neighbors, but with family as well. This growing lack of in-depth contact with others has created a whole new reality. "We can act with impunity," Dornbusch says. "You can assume that you will never see the other person again in your life. In a small town, to act rudely is to make an enemy for life." The importance of one's reputation in one's community has dissolved into a vast sink hole of mobility and inconstant strangers.

Neighborhood grocery and drug stores have been replaced by shopping centers and large, impersonal chain stores. People who work in them, drive in from distant communities. In large urban and suburban areas people aren't known in their own neighborhoods anymore. Even when shopping routinely in the same stores over many years, the high turnover rate of commuter employees and frequently changing work schedules assures that you rarely see the same checkout person twice. I recall shopping in the local supermarket with my mother when I was growing up in the 50s and 60s. My mother knew every sales clerk, butcher, and bag boy (there were no "bag girls" then) in the store. She couldn't go into that store without stopping to chat with two or three people she knew. Since I've been an adult, I've never had this experience. No store personnel recognizes me as a regular shopper, and I've never run into anyone I know.

Shopping in my "neighborhood" stores is a lonely, isolating activity. Driving throughout the Bay Area is irritating and maddening. I asked myself recently while driving, when did I become so angry? It occurred to me that I don't drive anywhere anymore when I don't at some point utter obscenities to, at least, one driver. I must drive so defensively now that I feel I should don a suit of armor and carry artillery. Driving defensively used to mean making sure other drivers were awake. Now, it means defending your right to get to your destination since most drivers are unthinkably rude, impatient, and disrespectful. Without realizing it, I've developed an irritable, defensive posture while behind the wheel.

Once upon a time people were content to follow the rules and obey laws, since most of us understood they usually promote the general well-being of society at large. But when was niceness and civility devaluated? Instead of the rugged individualist, we're now self-absorbed, self-important individuals. We lack concern of what others think because we probably won't see them again anyway. Mark Twain once said, "Good breeding consists of concealing how much we think of ourselves and how little we think of the other person." Our isolation from neighbors and others in society has apparently all but eliminated our need for "good breeding."

A current of anger runs rampant throughout today's society, but it's unfocused anger. Instead of directing rage to fix crucial social inequalities and injustices, this rage is channeled into the types of rude, intolerant behavior we experience from drivers. As motorists it's easy to become righteous, indignant, and discourteous. Nothing breaks down social controls like encapsulation in chunks of steel and the ability to zoom away. There's even less impetus to act civil toward other drivers than toward neighbors. Drivers can easily risk rudeness by violating rules of common courtesy, and flagrantly violate laws because there's

little repercussion for their actions. Also, shifting responsibility by seeing other drivers as a trespasser—such as lane changers—justifies such barbaric behavior as speeding up to block the lane changer's maneuver. In their cars, drivers become the ultimate big fish inside minuscule, but powerful steel and glass ponds. They become tyrants and feel free to give vent to frustrations because they feel "protected."

Ill-mannered drivers don't consider the effects of using vehicles as "power" tools, as possible substitutes for the lack of control in their lives. Nor do they consider why being inside a car intensifies feelings of power, nor question their own motives or behavior. Cameras at intersections may curb the epidemic of red-light running, but they won't stem the progression of the basic disease underlying the practice. Until we recognize the symptoms of this insidious, developing social disease, drivers (and, society in general) will continue the escalation of self-absorbed rudeness and aggression. We need to return once more to courteous, responsible actions. We also need to address the problem of inappropriate expression of emotions. Without some kind of natural inner governor to inhibit aggressive behavior—previously accomplished through our mutual and communal attachment and dependence on each other—we need to find a substitute, even if its only the understanding that life is simply more pleasant when people are polite and courteous. Although, encouraging and developing self-control seems reasonable, human nature usually requires a force greater than the self. However, teaching self-control is certainly an important start. Beyond that, parents need to instill once again the idea that courtesy and patience are virtues and facilitate the achievement of a peaceful, sane society. In the meantime, the storm clouds have only just begun to roll in just behind the red-light runners.

### **Works Consulted**

1. Leibovich, Mark. "Rude Awakening: Peninsulans Miss Manners as Boorishness Becomes Norm." San Jose Mercury News 14 Oct. 1994, Peninsula ed.: Am sec: 20.
2. Vioria, Theresa. "Fremont Targets Red-Light Runners 10 Intersections to Get Cameras Designed to Photograph Scofflaws." San Jose Mercury News 1 Aug. 1996, Alameda County ed., Local page sec: 1B.
3. Vioria, Theresa. "Fremont Weights Cameras to Capture Red-Light Runners." San Jose Mercury News 30 Jul. 1996, Morning final ed., Local page sec: 1B.