

SINGLED OUT

Motorcycle-Only Checkpoints Are Wrong

By Rob Dingman

Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.

— Benjamin Franklin, 1759

Since Sept. 11, 2001, we, as Americans, have been forced to endure a gradual erosion of the personal freedoms that many of us take for granted.

Consider, for example, the very negative public reaction to the methods used by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), the agency charged with keeping air travel safe. When the TSA began full-body scans and pat-downs of passengers at airports—techniques the agency admits are intrusive and uncomfortable—there was a significant backlash. According to a poll conducted by *USA Today* last November, the thorough pat-downs, akin to what police give suspects, bother or anger 57 percent of adult fliers.

Despite the enormous publicity surrounding this negative public reaction, the vast majority of air travellers have accepted these new practices by our federal government as necessary to ensure the security and safety of air travel.

Now imagine walking into an airport and finding that, in the name of “safety,” only one particular group was being subjected to this screening. How would it feel to be the focus of such scrutiny when everyone else could pass the security area unscathed?

That is exactly what is happening to motorcyclists on our highways. It seems that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has seen fit to single us out for motorcycle-only checkpoints (MOCs) funded by the federal government.

Late last year, we reported that NHTSA set up a \$350,000 grant program to be awarded to law enforcement agencies to target motorcyclists with MOCs. The demonstration program was modeled after a similar program conducted in New York state. Georgia is the first state to participate in the NHTSA grant program.

The Georgia State Patrol (GSP) conducted its first MOCs on Interstates 75 and 95 in March. In what can only be viewed as a case of opportunistic profiling, the GSP required all motorcyclists, many on their way to Bike Week in Daytona Beach, Fla., to stop and submit themselves to inspection for no reason other than they chose to ride on two (or three) wheels. Car and truck drivers zipped right by. AMA members who passed through the Georgia MOCs have reported to us that they were told that the checkpoint was a “homeland security initiative.”

This is wrong on so many levels.

At a time when we are continually reminded that “profiling is inappropriate and unacceptable,” why are motorcyclists—and only motorcyclists—being targeted for inspection?

Is it somehow more acceptable if the purpose of harassing motorcyclists is to ensure homeland security, even in the context of preventing terrorism?

NHTSA money is to be used only for traffic safety, not homeland security. There are numerous and more plentiful pots of money available for that purpose.

Finally, why is NHTSA spending taxpayer dollars on a law enforcement initiative of dubious benefit when far more effective programs such as rider education and motorist awareness are struggling in these challenging economic times?

I have been through one of the New York stops, and since I was running a stock exhaust and wearing a full-face helmet, they waived me through. Those with loud pipes and shorty helmets

were directed to another area for additional scrutiny. I asked the sergeant in charge what I could do to get him to stop, and his reply was, “Get all motorcyclists to comply with the law.”

Let me state the obvious: Homeland security has nothing at all to do with these motorcycle-only inspections. The primary purpose is to check for non-compliant helmets and exhaust systems and for proper license endorsement. While I admit that we have our share of scofflaws, the vast majority of motorcyclists are law-abiding citizens. So where is the justification for pulling over motorcyclists en masse? Meanwhile, car and truck drivers—distracted by cell phones and texting, perhaps with worn-out exhaust systems and improper or suspended licenses—motor by, unimpeded.

Many well-meaning traffic safety professionals believe these checkpoints are an acceptable strategy to reduce motorcycle fatalities. Some of them are even motorcyclists. Please contact your members of Congress and let them know that this is not an acceptable use of your tax dollars. We must make it clear that it is inappropriate for law enforcement to single out motorcyclists in this way. Let's tell our elected representatives to fund rider-education, motorist-awareness programs and research to better understand the causes of motorcycle crashes.

In the long term, the only way we can accomplish our goals is to have a louder and more powerful voice than we have today. Thank you for what you are doing to help in the fight to protect our motorcycling freedoms. I strongly encourage you to get your friends who are not AMA members to join the AMA today so that we can expand our voice. It is time to remind those in our society who are willing to trade permanent personal liberty for temporary safety that it is just as wrong today as when Benjamin Franklin warned against it in 1759.

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