

Don't Count Your Red Light Chickens Before They Hatch!

Written by Wilton D. Alston
Friday, 28 March 2008 17:36

This marks the third JBS Newsfeed I've done on the general subject of traffic control via surveillance. For something so mundane and seemingly innocuous, traffic surveillance seems to hold a strange fascination and appeal for me! As an aside, I would argue that the most innocuous trappings of civilization, and how each person interacts with them, convey particular wisdom about a society. (Given his treatment of something as commonplace as the television, I'd say George Orwell agrees with me.) All that said, this marks the coming full circle of the whole subject of red light cameras.

In one previous piece entitled, "[So What If No Lives are Saved? At Least Revenue is Increased!](#)", I examined the installation of red light cameras in Florida. In that case it was particularly ironic that the decision to proceed with that installation occurred the same day that a team of university researchers, also in Florida, published a report on the effectiveness of red light cameras. That report — which also included a study of other studies — showed that red light cameras not only did not lower deaths by discouraging motorists from running lights, they made matters worse. In fact, red light cameras increased the incidence of rear-end collisions at the intersections where they were installed. (Talk about bad timing!)

While the science and data of that particular conclusion persuaded me, I admit that using data of this type represents the classic *argument from effect*. The old saw that says, "there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics" remains true and we'd all be wise to remember it. One person's conclusive evidence is another person's 50/50 coin toss and so on. Simply put, that red light cameras might be shown not effective at their ostensive purpose using certain data is not the primary reason to decry them. The more basic logic is this: increased safety — in an enlightened society — is simply not derived from watching the inhabitants more closely. Again, one may refer to Orwell. If one does not like reading, one may visit any prison in the U.S. Same lesson; different venue.

The other major point I attempted to make in that piece was based upon what I've come to believe about the undergirding paradigm of any bureaucracy. When that bureaucracy also has a monopoly of force, as do most municipalities versus their citizens, one can rather accurately predict that bureaucracy's actions with regard to such things as revenue generation. Simply put, public bureaucracies will almost always opt for ways to increase revenue, no matter the ancillary effects — safety be damned. Lives may be saved or they may be sacrificed, but either way "The spice must flow!" (Hat tip: Frank Herbert's *Dune*.) There is a wealth of libertarian writing on the subject of how public ownership perverts normal incentives, but rather than dig into that, I'll simply cite Aristotle from "Politics" with:

What is common to the greatest number gets the least amount of care. Men pay most attention to what is their own; they care less for what is common; or at any rate they care for it only to the extent to which each is individually concerned. Even when there is no other cause for attention,

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men are more prone to neglect their duty when they think that another is attending to it.

So what do the cited article, "Red light cameras too good for their own good?" and the previous article, have to do with Aristotle's sentiment expressed so long ago? I'm glad you asked! Basically, the safety of each of us is best maintained by each of us. When we submit to the rule of others and expect them to provide for our safety, they usually do not, although they may use our desires for safety for their own gains. That which is ostensibly owned by the greatest number gets the least care.

If one were to place the likely discussions between agents of the state, such as say, the Hillsborough County Commission regarding the installation of red light cameras, into a logical flow, it might look something like this.

- We need revenue. From where should we get it?
- We only have one place from which to get our revenue, the people.
- We certainly cannot simply say to them, "Give us more money!"
- Then we must give them *something* for which they have already expressed a need — safety, for example — while also addressing our need for more revenue.
- Meeting adjourned!

With apologies for stealing a quote from a Norm MacDonald comedy bit from long ago, red light cameras are "just the ticket." If one markets something like red light cameras as if they increased safety, while realizing that they will also increase revenue, particularly if the program is structured like Hillsborough County's, it represents the proverbial win-win proposition for everyone, well almost everyone anyway. (In Hillsborough County's program, tickets will be mailed to people who are cited. They simply mail in their payment. The citations will have no effect on their driving record. Should they wish to appeal, they must appear in court.) This is genius and would, *ceteris paribus*, result in the maximal revenue.

Not so fast my friend. Returning to the MSNBC article originally cited above:

At the heart of the discussions taking place in city councils and county commissions is tension between the twin benefits that were touted when local governments began installing cameras about a decade and a half ago. Officials were promised that the cameras — which take snapshots of busy intersections, capturing the license plates of any cars that are running the light — would simultaneously save lives and generate millions of dollars in extra fines.

What discussion? The discussion in question is the discussion where they try to reconcile two

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facts that contradict the "twin beliefs" used to justify the wholesale installation of the cameras in the first place. Bogus belief one: red light cameras save lives. The MSNBC article is somewhat non-committal on this first point, saying:

A federal study found a small but measurable reduction in injuries nationwide in accidents at intersections monitored by cameras, though there was an increase in some kinds of collisions.

Given that several studies, including the seven-year study conducted by the Virginia Transportation council also show an increase in accidents at intersections monitored by the cameras, it's not worth that much debate, particularly when one other piece of data shows the real motivations for considering removing the cameras at this time. Under the heading of bogus belief two, we again return to the MSNBC article:

As drivers learn where the cameras are, they are more careful. Fewer of them run red lights. Local governments collect fewer fines. ... Sometimes, as in Dallas, cameras generate so little revenue that they can't even pay for themselves.

The article goes on:

Citywide statistics obtained by NBC affiliate KXAS-TV found that red light cameras do reduce accidents. That is a good thing. ... But they [the red light cameras] do it by reducing red light violations, by as much as 29 percent from month to month at particularly busy Dallas intersections. On the face of it, that, too, is a good thing — but not, necessarily, **if you rely on traffic fines to make up a healthy chunk of your budget** . [Emphasis mine.]

So what do they plan to do? Take the cameras down. Now, I'm certainly no master of logic, but if the cameras were installed for safety, and if safety was actually enhanced by the cameras, taking them down places the citizenry in more danger, does it not? However, if the citizenry are in no more (and no less, for that matter) danger either way, and if revenue enhancement was a primary reason for installing the cameras, then the instant the cameras begin to generate less money than it costs to maintain them, there is but one reasonable course of action: Take the cameras down. This is exactly what many municipalities, Dallas among them, are considering.

I'm all for taking them down, but can there be any real debate about why they put them up in the first place?