

OK, don't wear your seatbelt, but first agree to pick up tab

By SANDY STEVENS

Is there anybody else out there who is a little tired of ceding the patriotic high ground to those who would preserve our "right" not to wear seatbelts?

Seems we should be willing to spill a little blood to keep the government out of our laps, according to the no-new-thinking gospel. And besides, we hear over and over, it's a personal decision, don't you think?

I think your inalienable right to get thrown through the windshield ends at the point where the rest of us are expected to pick up the tab.

And pick it up we most surely do — in higher auto insurance premiums, higher medical insurance premiums, higher long-term public health-care costs for those crippled, maimed and orphaned (but not independently wealthy), higher employer costs for time lost and retraining — the list goes on and on.

Now, how about a look at those who benefit from the freedom to choose?

Well, there are the wearers of the big lower lip, insisting that nobody is going to tell them what to do, like Congressman Bob Smith.

Even as they drive on the right side of the road, use turn signals, get safety inspections every year, and obey road signs and traffic signals, they rail against a public transportation regulation that (gasp!) — all must obey!

While the specter of having a state trooper ruffle through the folds of our clothes to ensure compliance is not something that most of us would welcome, the use of such emotional and groundless appeals to support a profoundly untenable position, thus keeping us from judging the issue on its merits, is the kind of political switchblade-in-the-ribs that has taken us from Willie Horton and the Flag Factory to No New Taxes and the S&L hand-slapping being administered by the chefs of the '80s' feeding frenzy. But I digress.

I cornered Congressman Bob during the prerace ceremonies at the new race track in Loudon recently,

Guest Commentary

and asked his position on the proposed OSHA regulation that says, in effect, that those who drive at work shall wear seatbelts. OSHA's position is that if safety equipment is provided at work, it must be used.

Any of us who have ever had a foreman hand us safety glasses when operating a grinding wheel or have ever been issued a hardhat when entering a construction site are familiar with the concept.

Congressman Bob says he's against it, that it should be a personal decision. I persisted, "It is a fact," I said, "that those wearing belts are much less likely to lose control in an emergency, because they stay behind the wheel after the first swerve to avoid impact, while the unbelted driver is either grabbing the wheel like a life-ring or is sitting somewhere else.

"Don't we have a right to safe passage on the highways? Don't we have a right to expect other drivers to take reasonable and prudent steps, using equipment provided by law, to ensure that they have the best chance of staying in control?"

Congressman Bob looked annoyed. He didn't talk annoyed, what with the microphone in his face and all, but you could tell he didn't want to examine any issues that day.

And besides, the race was starting. In front of a magnificent grandstand filled with 45,000 New Englanders, 37 drivers were strapping themselves into their cars with five-point harnesses so tight that it was an effort to breathe.

They all knew, you see, that some of them would crash.

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