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Speeding tickets: a form of tyranny?

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On April 15, I filed.

On April 16, I got taxed - but not by the federal government.

It was Wednesday night at about 11 o'clock. I was driving to my humble Riverside apartment after a productive evening of video editing on campus. It was cool and dry outside. The fluorescent tint of dozens of taquería signs illuminated the cloudy silhouette of the Austin skyline in the distance. And that's when I saw it: Just a block after turning onto Riverside Drive from the I-35 frontage road, one of the Austin Police Department's finest clocked me at 45 mph in a 35 zone. He was parked, lights off, in front of a taco joint.

Never mind that there was no traffic and that the nearest car in my lane was mere specks of light a couple blocks ahead. The law says nothing about traffic conditions or context, officers will remind you - absolutely nothing about judgment or observation skills.

I was cordial and cooperative with the officer, even if he was cold and suspicious with me. That's his job, right? This is Riverside, after all.

I explained that it was a simple mistake: I took my eyes off the speedometer momentarily but slowed down as soon as I realized my error. I told the officer that I'm a student; I live right down the road. I even had my stereo turned down all the way.

He wrote me the ticket, despite the fact that my driving over the posted speed limit had endangered no one. Stone sober, hands at ten and two, eyes on the road - but I was a few miles per hour over the limit, and that's enough to tax me a couple hundred bucks.

Worst of all, the officer ran a red light to give me the ticket. I would argue that his actions were more dangerous than mine, but the bottom line is that there is no more shameful and ugly tax-collecting scheme than a speed trap.

Most people drive around with a fear and suspicion of cops they would not harbor if speeding tickets did not exist. Most drivers, myself included, don't break the law. We don't harm people; we just drive to work or class as we have to. We are honest, tax-paying people who exercise good judgment when we make decisions, and all we ask is to exercise judgment without fear of getting stuck with a fine of up to \$278.

To believe that fast driving equals bad driving is grossly naive. I would rather share the road with an alert driver who regularly drives 10 mph over the speed limit than someone who drives 10 mph under and treats their rearview mirror as a compact for applying makeup. Speed is only as dangerous as a driver's alertness. True, the faster you go, the less alertness matters in avoiding accidents. But 45 in a 35 with minimal traffic does not equal dangerous or bad driving. If you think it does, I don't trust you behind the wheel.

If I am swerving or changing lanes erratically, pull me over. If I am tailgating at fast speeds in rush-hour traffic, pull me over. If I am running reds and rolling through stops at crowded intersections, by all means, pull me over. But if I'm driving like any sane person would under similar conditions, just let me go about my evening.

It is a total misuse of the power and trust we lend to the police to set up speed traps and hand out tickets to broke college students. If you asked people to list their 20 biggest concerns that the police should tackle, I really doubt fining the tax base would be one of them. It puts unnecessary fear in the hearts and minds of law-abiding citizens.

My dictionary software tells me that one definition of "tyranny" is "dominance achieved by threat of punishment." That sounds about right.

Let's stop pretending that speeding tickets are anything but a hidden tax on otherwise law-abiding citizens.

I probably don't have to spell it out - since you know I'm living off Riverside - but my bank account is not one of my stronger assets, especially since I'm graduating in four weeks and trying to save what I can (and still haven't bought the cap and gown).

But somebody somewhere thinks it's a good idea to tax soon-to-be college grads a little extra, even in this economy. I mean, throw me a friggin' bone.

When I get my refund check in six weeks, I will use it to pay for the offensively boring defensive driving class to dismiss the ticket. Maybe the rest I'll invest in a nice radar jammer.

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