

## Opinions

# Cry, your car's on hidden camera



By **Kathleen Parker** Opinion writer September 23, 2014

Without prior knowledge or intent, I recently was inducted into a club I had no interest in joining, especially in light of the \$200 initiation fee.

In fact, I had no idea I had joined until the bill arrived notifying me that a camera had caught me exceeding the speed limit somewhere along the route between downtown Washington and the Maryland border. My aggravation at being charged, judged and sentenced without the courtesy of a human exchange was made worse by the realization that I had been denied the opportunity to adequately appreciate that on at least one day, the city's eastbound traffic was actually moving.

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To a fan of eye contact under almost any circumstance, the feeling was of having been observed without permission. There is a reason our justice system allows the accused to face his accuser.

Notwithstanding these common understandings, speed and red-light cameras are becoming increasingly prevalent as reflected by the bulging coffers of participating towns and municipalities. In Washington alone, traffic citations total [about \\$179 million a year](#).

So what's wrong with that? Drive too fast or run a red light, and take your medicine, non-drivers contemptuously intone. (See the comments section.)

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Well, yes, but not really. Here's the relevant question: Are the cameras designed to increase public safety, or are they just a means to trap citizens and make money?

The conclusion of an audit earlier this month by the [District of Columbia inspector general](#) suggests the latter. In one revealing quote cited [in the report](#), a senior district official commented on the effrontery and efficacy of the parking-ticket system:

"One of the beauties of parking, it's like the [Internal Revenue Service]. If you get a parking ticket, you are guilty until you have proven yourself innocent. . . . And that's worked well for us."

Ditto can be said of camera-caught speeders and red-light runners, which resulted in 666,275 tickets in 2013.

As a consequence, annoyed citizens have begun challenging speed cameras on issues of property rights and home rule. In

Ohio, [29 state lawmakers and two civil liberties groups](#) joined a motorist in a court challenge claiming that the city of Toledo violated his constitutional rights to due process.

The argument basically questioned whether the city was attempting to exact property from Ohio drivers without access to a judge authorized by and accountable to duly elected legislators.

It all gets rather weedy — and does seem like picking a nit to cure a plague — but so goes U.S. jurisprudence. The Ohio motorist's case points to the more general concern that gotcha cameras, by eliminating the middle man (that being a human being), violate our sense of fair play.

What was that camera's name, anyway, and what was he doing in my business? Did the camera bother to wonder *why* I might be driving faster than I'm supposed to? Excuse me, but could I speak to a human, please?

Bottom line: Mr. Camera doesn't care.

Which brings us to my own rather metaphysical perspective. While not on an existential par with events in Syria and Iraq, someone has to worry about our self-inflicted war on ourselves and our submission to dystopian efficiency over humanity.

There may well be reason to install cameras at red lights to catch those who fail to stop. But exceeding the speed limit often means keeping pace with traffic, which is sometimes safer. One car pulled aside by a traffic officer is usually sufficient to slow the herd, whereas a camera no one notices gives no one pause. Where's the safety in that?

And then there are the true emergencies — the woman in labor or the injured child being rushed to the hospital. While these occasions are perhaps rare compared with people who are merely in a hurry, they illustrate our increasing lack of regard for the human side of events.

Once we accept the necessity of cameras to keep the citizenry in line, especially when keeping order is so profitable, we needn't let our imaginations wander far to see that absolute order is the endgame in a brave new world. The weird genius of the speeding/parking ticket industry is that we the people enrich the bureaucracies that torment us. *And their little machines, too!*

Surely with all the money just from parking tickets — \$82.8 million in 2013 — Washington could hire some organic traffic officers. Or at least provide a little soma to ease the transition.

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