

# Virginia Viewpoint

## Give Me Liberty

By Donald J. Boudreaux, J.D., Ph.D.

### Summary

If we relinquish our rights to taxpayer-funded, domestic terrorists in an effort to protect ourselves from foreign terrorists, have we accomplished anything?

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***Can liberty last in a culture so infused with fear that most people willingly accept government infringements of basic privacy and property rights? No.***

It's trite during these tense times to repeat Benjamin Franklin's famous warning that "They that can give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty or safety." But, trite or not, Franklin's point is vitally important.

And for me, the wisdom of Philadelphia's favorite son was recently customized, so to speak.

I just returned from a brief visit to Guatemala. While there, I purchased three original paintings to hang on my living room walls. They were not expensive, costing me a total of about \$800.

Because one of the paintings was large, I couldn't carry it home as baggage. Instead, I packed the three paintings securely together and shipped them as cargo. Of course, I knew that doing so would require that my package first clear U.S. Customs before being turned over to me.

The day after returning to the U.S., I drove back to Dulles Airport to retrieve my package. The friendly clerk at Delta Airlines cargo directed me to the Customs office at Dulles.

At Customs, I showed the not-so-friendly official my receipt and my airbill. Then he asked if I intended to sell the paintings. "No," I responded truthfully. "I'll hang them in my home."

He studied me for a few seconds, then asked what I do for a living.

"I'm an economics professor at George Mason University," I replied.

He then demanded some I.D. I handed him my Virginia driver's license.

He took it, looked at it severely, glanced back at me, and then typed some numbers – probably my Social Security number – into his computer. A few seconds later he peered at me suspiciously out of the corners of his eyes and declared "For a college professor, you certainly travel quite a lot."

I was dumbfounded.

Does my Social Security number give government agents detailed information on my comings and goings? Apparently so. I was born in the

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United States and have lived here all 44 years of my life. I haven't as much as a speeding violation on my record. (We college professors aren't known for our propensity to take risks.) And while I do travel by air about once a month, I seldom travel outside of the U.S. Nothing about me suggests that I am a member of a sub-group of the population that poses a genuine threat to the lives and property of Americans.

Yet now I know that the government monitors my travel. I know also that it is willing to pass judgment on my frequency of travel – perhaps to warn those who might contemplate acts of terrorism (or who think of sneaking into the U.S. some undeclared foreign merchandise) to cease and desist.

Let's grant that a government that spies on its own citizens is better informed than is a non-spying government and, hence, better able to prevent terrorism. I fear that this increased security is being purchased at too high a price.

By "high price" I don't mean the added inconveniences that travelers must endure at airports and border crossings. Nor do I mean whatever additional taxes are surely required to fund a more extensive and intrusive government. Instead, I mean the realignment of people's relationship to government – a realignment that turns citizens into subjects.

Can freedom and responsibility survive if government agents treat everyone as a potential danger to the republic? Can liberty last in a culture so infused with fear that most people willingly accept government infringements of basic privacy and property rights?

No.

No society is worth preserving if its people lose all sense of what is properly their own private spheres which ought never be invaded. To cede to government vast powers to intrude into private places is to promote an especially frightful sort of homegrown terrorism. Such terrorism is so frightful precisely because it is often buoyed by a perverse legitimacy accorded to it by its own victims. But, of course, being terrorized by people whose passports look the same as yours and who practice your religion is just as inexcusable as being terrorized by foreigners.

I wish now that I hadn't been so dumbfounded when the Customs agent remarked suspiciously upon my frequency of travel. I wish, instead, that I had said, simply but firmly, "My travel history is none of your business." I might have suffered delay in retrieving my paintings, but at least I would have done as much as any ordinary person can do to fight the good fight for freedom.

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(Donald J. Boudreaux is professor of economics at George Mason University and a member of the Board of Scholars of the Virginia Institute for Public Policy, an education and research organization headquartered in Potomac Falls, Virginia. **Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliations are cited.**)

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