

A RED LIGHT FOR SCOFFLAWS

Frank Trippett

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¹ Law-and-order is the longest-running and probably the best-loved political issue in U.S. history. Yet it is painfully apparent that millions of Americans who would never think of themselves as law-breakers, let alone criminals, are taking increasing liberties with the legal codes that are designed to protect and nourish their society. Indeed, there are moments today—amid outlaw litter, tax cheating, illicit noise and motorized anarchy—when it seems as though the scofflaw represents the wave of the future. Harvard Sociologist

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David Riesman suspects that a majority of Americans have blithely taken to committing supposedly minor derelictions as a matter of course. Already, Riesman says, the ethic of U.S. society is in danger of becoming this: "You're a fool if you obey the rules."

² Nothing could be more obvious than the evidence supporting Riesman. Scofflaws abound in amazing variety. The graffiti-prone turn public surfaces into visual rubbish. Bicyclists often ride as though two-wheeled vehicles are exempt from all traffic laws. Litterbugs convert their communities into trash dumps. Widespread flurries of ordinances have failed to clear public places of high-decibel portable radios, just as earlier laws failed to wipe out the beer-soaked hooliganism that plagues many parks. Tobacco addicts remain hopelessly blind to signs that say NO SMOKING. Respectably dressed pot smokers no longer bother to duck out of public sight to pass around a joint. The flagrant use of cocaine is a festering scandal in middle- and upper-class life. And then there are (hello, Everybody!) the jaywalkers.

³ The dangers of scofflawry vary wildly. The person who illegally spits on the sidewalk remains disgusting, but clearly poses less risk to others than the company that illegally buries hazardous chemical waste in an unauthorized location. The fare beater on the subway presents less threat to life than the landlord who ignores fire safety statutes. The most immediately and measurably dangerous scofflawry, however, also happens to be the most visible. The culprit is the American driver, whose lawless activities today add up to a colossal public nuisance. The hazards range from routine double parking that jams city streets to the drunk driving that kills some 25,000 people and injures at least 650,000 others yearly. Illegal speeding on open highways? New surveys show that on some interstate highways 83% of all drivers are currently ignoring the federal 55 m.p.h. speed limit.

⁴ The most flagrant scofflaw of them all is the red-light runner. The flouting of stop signals has got so bad in Boston that residents tell an anecdote about a cabby who insists that red lights are "just for decoration." The power of the stoplight to control traffic seems to be waning everywhere. In Los Angeles, red-light running has become perhaps the city's most common traffic violation. In New York City, going through an intersection is like Russian roulette. Admits Police Commissioner Robert J. McGuire: "Today it's a

50-50 toss-up as to whether people will stop for a red light." Meanwhile, his own police largely ignore the lawbreaking.

5 Red-light running has always been ranked as a minor wrong, and so it may be in individual instances. When the violation becomes habitual, widespread and incessant, however, a great deal more than a traffic management problem is involved. The flouting of basic rules of the road leaves deep dents in the social mood. Innocent drivers and pedestrians pay a repetitious price in frustration, inconvenience and outrage, not to mention a justified sense of mortal peril. The significance of red-light running is magnified by its high visibility. If hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, then furtiveness is the true outlaw's salute to the force of law-and-order. The red-light runner, however, shows no respect whatever for the social rules, and society cannot help being harmed by any repetitions and brazen display of contempt for the fundamentals of order.

6 The scofflaw spirit is pervasive. It is not really surprising when schools find, as some do, that children frequently enter not knowing some of the basic rules of living together. For all their differences, today's scofflaws are of a piece as a symptom of elementary social demoralization—the loss by individuals of the capacity to govern their own behavior in the interest of others.

7 The prospect of the collapse of public manners is not merely a matter of etiquette. Society's first concern will remain major crime, but a foretaste of the seriousness of incivility is suggested by what has been happening in Houston. Drivers on Houston freeways have been showing an increasing tendency to replace the rules of the road with violent outbreaks. Items from the Houston police department's new statistical category—freeway traffic violence: 1) Driver flashes high-beam lights at car that cut in front of him, whose occupants then hurl a beer can at his windshield, kick out his tail lights, slug him eight stitches' worth. 2) Dump-truck driver annoyed by delay batters trunk of stalled car ahead and its driver with steel bolt. 3) Hurrying driver of 18-wheel truck deliberately rear-ends car whose driver was trying to stay within 55 m.p.h. limit. The Houston Freeway Syndrome has fortunately not spread everywhere. But the question is: Will it?

8 Americans are used to thinking that law-and-order is threatened mainly by stereotypical violent crime. When the foundations of U.S. law have actually been shaken, however, it has always been

because ordinary law-abiding citizens took to skirting the law. Major instance: Prohibition. Recalls Donald Barr Chidsey in *On and Off the Wagon*: "Lawbreaking proved to be not painful, not even uncomfortable, but, in a mild and perfectly safe way, exhilarating." People wiped out Prohibition at last not only because of the alcohol issue but because scofflawry was seriously undermining the authority and legitimacy of government. Ironically, today's scofflaw spirit, whatever its undetermined origins, is being encouraged unwittingly by government at many levels. The failure of police to enforce certain laws is only the surface of the problem: they take their mandate from the officials and constituents they serve. Worse, most state legislatures have helped subvert popular compliance with the federal 55 m.p.h. law, some of them by enacting puny fines that trivialize transgressions. On a higher level, the Administration in Washington has dramatized its wish to nullify civil rights laws simply by opposing instead of supporting certain court-ordered desegregation rulings. With considerable justification, environmental groups, in the words of *Wilderness* magazine, accuse the Administration of "destroying environmental laws by failing to enforce them, or by enforcing them in ways that deliberately encourage noncompliance." Translation: scofflawry at the top.

9 The most disquieting thing about the scofflaw spirit is its extreme infectiousness. Only a terminally foolish society would sit still and allow it to spread indefinitely.

Questions About "Illustration"

1. To better appreciate Trippett's use of illustration as a method of development, underline and enumerate the examples he gives. Making specific reference to the text, explain in detail Trippett's purpose in giving examples.

Questions on Diction and Expository Techniques

1. How does your dictionary define "illicit," "blithely," and "derelictions" (par. 1); "flouting" (par. 4); "pervasive" (par. 6); "incivility"

- (par. 7); “stereotypical” and “noncompliance” (par. 8)? Use each of these words in a sentence.
2. Reexamine each paragraph. Enumerate those that contain a topic sentence. Underline each such sentence.
 3. Transition words may be used to signal support, expansion, or qualification of a previous statement. What, in paragraph 3, does “however” signal? In what other paragraphs does Trippett use such words? Explain the contribution those words make to coherence within the paragraphs in which they appear.
 4. Is the information in paragraph 2 sufficient to support the generalization Trippett makes in the paragraph?
 5. Trippett quotes the well-known sociologist David Riesman in paragraph 1. Where else in the essay does Trippett include quotations? How does the material within quotation marks, in each instance, relate to his expository purpose?
 6. Where does Trippett state his thesis? What is the advantage in his stating his main idea where he does rather than elsewhere in the essay?
 7. Trippett wrote this piece for *Time* magazine. How differently might he have written it for a different audience: grammar school children, for example; or trainees at a police academy; or a society of sociologists?

For Discussion, Reading, and Writing

1. Based on information gathered from whatever source, especially from personal experience and observation, prewrite a short essay on the question raised in the quotation from David Riesman. Write a draft of such an essay one day and a final version the next.
2. Write an amply illustrated short essay about the flouting of rules in the high school you attended.
3. Are there scofflaws, in the sense Trippett uses the term, on your campus? Write a short essay about one such person.
4. Write a short essay on a particular characteristic of your classmates that you find fault with. Make your criticisms specific.