



# ONLY JACKASSES DON'T BUCKLE UP

By Frank Bryan

*The strength of the case for a law forcing us to use our seat belts is inversely related to the reasonableness of the personal decision to do so.*

**V**ermonters, said Calvin Coolidge, will do almost anything you ask them to and almost nothing you tell them to. Not any more it seems.

The politics of brute force have replaced the politics of reason. The Federal Government told us to raise our drinking age — or else. The State Government ordered us to adopt kindergartens — or else. Some Vermonters keep junk cars in their yards. The State decided they didn't look nice and demanded we haul some of them away — or else. This year the Legislature considered a bill that would force us to fasten our seat belts when we go for a ride in our car — or else.

All of these are based on billy club logic. Not one is helping us do anything we could not do by ourselves or in governments we more easily understand and can control. One forces the scenic values of the rural chic on the rural poor. Another strips the town meeting of still another of its local responsibilities. The drinking age law kowtows to an exceptionally odious twist in the politics of federalism, policy by blackmail — do This or we'll cut your funds for That. It also lays down the incredible dictum that some citizens of legal age who may marry, have kids, incur debt, get their heads blown off in a war, and vote, can't buy a six-pack of beer.

Every one of these orders from on high carries the same fundamental flaw. They are all inhuman. The seat belt law is the most inhuman of all. It represents the extreme of a plethora of government acts that are violating the very character of Vermont by destroying our social ecology of human scale. It is as harmful to our civil order as is acid rain to our natural order.

Vermont offers few guarantees. Certainly not economic security or many of the comforts that accompany the life styles of other Americans. Yet for two centuries Vermont has preserved the one most essential quality of life: It has granted its citizens the right to decide for themselves how they will live their lives; it has paid them the ultimate compliment of treating them like people — that is, animals with a free will. It has provided the environment whereby we have the right to be stupid.

A very wise person once put it another way: What separates humans from other animals is that even though they too are insignificant in the order of things, they are the only ones that know it.

Because Vermonters spent as many of their waking hours dealing with animals as with people, they came to understand the difference. They have always respected the sacred ground reserved for humanity that involves the right to fail, to be wrong, bullheaded or lazy. They have understood that there is no right to success or accomplishment, no capacity for artistry, genius, innovation and charity without the concomitant right to be a damned fool.

Arguments for the seat belt law are fraught with difficulty. If we really wanted to save lives, for instance, we'd outlaw smoking. Perhaps we will. There is absolutely nothing in principle that stands in our way if we accept the seat belt law. The main argument for mandating seat belts is that society has a "stake" in your life and expects you to live to make a contribution. Moreover, if you get hurt society will have to pay to make you well. Put in context these arguments grow weak and by extension they grow absurd. The context of the argument is a government sponsored cocoon whereby we are continually enwrapped in more and more "fail safe" mechanisms that preclude, bit by tiny bit, our freedom of action. The extension of the argument leads rapidly to the words of D.H. Lawrence:

*Men fight for liberty and win it with hard knocks, their children, brought up easy, let it slip away again poor fools. And their children are once more slaves.*

And what is the lesson for our children? It is hard enough to explain the 21-year-old drinking law. How do we tell them about responsibility when we adults have to be told to fasten our seat belts? Children have not yet been conditioned to live with the absurd. They must smile inwardly when their parents admonish them to "Act responsibly. Someday there won't be anyone around like me to tell you what to do."

Oh yes there will. We are becoming a society of children. Do we really want to live in a place where the citizenry is led by the hand? Do we really want to create a government that EXPECTS to be able to so fine tune everyday behavior that it can enforce something like a seat belt law? Do we really believe that a population so accustomed to manipulation and a government so trained to manipulate can ever be a humane society; can be, indeed, a civil society?

No. Let's put an end to this business here and now. In Vermont we have always lived on our hind legs. You best know this on a hilltop in late autumn watching the impending winter roll down across the sky from the north. There is you and there is the rest of the world. You exult in the joy of being free and surviving in a harsh land — a world of furry creatures that don't NEED to survive because they exist by nature. Your survival is your business. You know it by the wetness in your eyes and the heat in your spirit. There is one word for it and only one.

Dignity.

Instead of passing a seat belt law, let us instead appropriate funds for several large green signs to be placed at the border of the state for the benefit of the many visitors that travel here. Let those signs read:

"Only jackasses don't wear seat belts. That is why there is no seat belt law in Vermont." □