“The more aggressive the police get, the safer the streets can be,” Mr. Fox said, “but there’s a price in terms of individual freedoms, civil liberties, civil rights.”

“The essence of freedom is tolerance, not zero tolerance,” Richard D. Emery, a civil rights lawyer, wrote in an Op-Ed article in The New York Times on Friday.

Thomas Reppetto, president of the Citizens Crime Commission of New York City, a watchdog group, said he did not want to believe that the equation was that tidy.

“I see no inherent conflict between good crime control and respect for people’s rights,” he said.

But, he added with a note of pessimism, “it’s very hard to apply in practice.”

Questions

1. What are the various reasons why, during the 1980s and 90s, politicians defined drugs and drug-related crimes as social problems of sufficient magnitude to justify giving the police the mandate to fight a war on drugs?

2. How can being at war against drugs lead police officers to cross the fragile line between law enforcement practices that are justifiably forceful and practices that are excessively brutal and abusive?

3. According to the author, how do whites’ attitudes about the importance of getting tough on drugs and drug-related crimes inadvertently encourage police officers to mistreat black crime suspects?

4. In what ways is the tension between public safety and civil liberties described in this article currently manifesting itself in the war on terror? In other words, to what degree is there public sentiment nowadays that restricting the civil rights of people who fit a terrorist profile (people who appear to be of Middle Eastern descent) is necessary for public safety in the post-9/11 era?

Making Road Dangers Invisible

Drunk Drivers and Other Dangers

MALCOLM GLADWELL

This essay describes a law passed in New York City in the late 1990s that characterizes the tough stance shared by lawmakers and the American public toward people who drink and drive. After acknowledging the serious dangers of drunk driving, Gladwell discusses the arbitrariness of the New York City law, given that there are a variety of causes of recklessness on the road besides drinking and driving. He highlights two particular behaviors—driving a sport-utility vehicle and talking on a cell phone while driving—that pose perhaps greater road hazards than drunk driving and yet receive much less public and policymaking attention. And indeed it is no accident that the behaviors that produce these other road hazards are not regarded as irresponsible in the way that drunk driving is. The manufacturers of sport-utility vehicles and cell phones play a powerful role in de-emphasizing the magnitude of the road dangers they pose.

Last week, New York City began confiscating the automobiles of people caught drinking and driving. On the first day of the crackdown, the police seized three cars, including one from a man who had been arrested for drunk driving on eight previous occasions. The tabloids cheered. Mothers Against Drunk Driving nodded in approval. After a recent series of brutal incidents involving the police tarnished the Giuliani administration, the Mayor’s anti-crime crusade appeared to right itself. The city now has the toughest anti-drunk-driving policy in the country, and the public was given a welcome reminder that the vast majority of the city’s thirty-eight thousand cops are neither racist nor reckless and that the justice they mete out is largely deserved. “There’s a very simple way to stay out of this problem, for you, your family,
someone else with a vehicle. But how is the moral culpability of the countless Americans who have walked into a dealership and made a decision to buy a fifty-six-hundred-pound sport utility any different? Of course, there are careful S.U.V. drivers and careful car-phone users. Careful people can get drunk, too, and overcompensate for their impairment by creeping along at twenty-five miles an hour, and in New York City we won’t hesitate to take away their vehicles.

Obviously, Giuliani, even in his most crusading moments, isn’t about to confiscate all the car phones and S.U.V.s on the streets of New York. States should, however, stop drivers from using car phones while the car is in motion, as some countries, including England, do. And a prohibitive weight tax on sport utilities would probably be a good idea. The moneys collected could be used to pay the medical bills and compensate the family of anyone hit by some cell-phone-wielding yuppie in a four-wheeled behemoth.

Questions

1. According to Gladwell, what kinds of road hazards are caused by talking on a cell phone while driving? What kinds of road hazards do sport-utility vehicles pose? How extensive are these hazards compared to the dangers of drunk driving?

2. Most people tend to view cell phones and sport-utility vehicles as adding a variety of advantages to their lives, not as menacing sources of danger. Let’s take a moment to recognize how favorable impressions toward cell phones and sport-utility vehicles are reflected through advertising. Flip through a magazine and find an ad for a cell phone and an ad for a sport-utility vehicle. Then list the various benefits that the ads ascribe to each of these products.

3. Now spend a few minutes thinking more broadly about these ads. How do the wireless phone and automobile industries respectively advertise their products so that consumers are inclined to see the road hazards caused by talking on a cell phone while driving or driving a sport-utility vehicle as less in need of fixing than the road dangers caused by drunk driving?

4. Identify some of the ways that the manufacturers of cell phones and sport-utility vehicles can influence the level and kind of attention that lawmakers give to each of these consumer products.