



Free Press Viewpoint

'Creepy' invasion sign of the times?

A federal appeals court says it's OK for the police to slip into your yard or home and slip a global positioning device onto your car.

The court ruled that federal drug agents had not violated a suspected drug dealer's rights when they snuck into his driveway at night and attached a GPS recording device to his Jeep.

In court, the agents testified that the Jeep visited sites where marijuana was grown, linking the defendant to the crimes. The judges of the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled twice, a three-judge panel, and later the full court, that the GPS logs could be used as evidence.

Though some, including the chief judge, dissented, the court ruled that there's no reason agents would need a warrant to attach the device to the Jeep. The dissenters said they believed, however, that the man's rights had been violated. One judge called the technique "creepy," the agents crawling under the man's car in the night.

The tactic itself is nothing new. Cops have been attaching bugs, beepers and tracking devices to suspects' cars for years. It's just that the technology has gotten a lot more sophisticated. GPS devices using today's software can project trips onto a map, showing exactly where a vehicle went.

Truth of the matter is, most of us are recording the same information all the time. Agents would need a warrant to get most of that, however, so there is a difference. We think.

Cell phones can track the bearer by block and mile. Your phone, when on, talks to the nearest tower continually. How did you think the computer finds you when someone calls? It has to know where you are. It remembers.

Newer phones have GPS technology; they talk with the satellite system and record positions – if you turn that feature on. This gives them the ability to broadcast your location to the 911 operator in an emergency, but your phone is quite capable of remembering where you've been.

And remember, your phone tracks every call you make, to whom and where.

And the sweet-talking GPS in your car? Of course, it remembers where you've been all week as well. Notice those little blue lines going down the streets around your house.

If the government subpoenas your Garmin, you'd better hope you stopped only at the grocery, not the drug dealer's house – or your girlfriend's.

So with everyone recording their every move, do we have any expectation of privacy? With surveillance cameras at every store and on every corner?

Still, we can't agree that federal agents should be able to sneak into your driveway and bug your car without a warrant. That is creepy.

And so much a sign of our times. — Steve Haynes

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Gator park tickles her fancy

I held an alligator and even got to tickle his tummy last week during a visit to Colorado Gators, a fish farm and wildlife preserve.

The San Luis Valley of Colorado, which competes with northern Minnesota for the lowest temperatures in the winter, seems a strange place for an alligator preserve, but there it is, sitting above a series of geothermal wells. When the snow is on the ground, the water is nice and warm – sort of a very large hot tub for reptiles, amphibians and fish.

The farm started in 1974 when a family from Texas bought land with a plan to grow tilapia, a kind of African perch that requires warm water.

The fish did well, but there was all the leftovers after they were filleted and sent off to restaurants and fish markets of Denver. In 1987, someone got the bright idea of feeding the leftovers to alligators, so 100 baby gators were purchased from Florida.

The gators loved the leftovers and thrived in the 87-degree waters.

In 1990, the farm opened its doors to the public and became not only a working fish farm but a regional tourists attraction. Soon, it became a sanctuary for unwanted exotic pets of all types, as people started sending their oversized and overaged snakes, lizards and alligators there because the farm refuses to kill any of its exotic friends.

I've known about the wonderland of reptiles



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

for many years and have hoped to visit, but with this and that and the other, the chance has just never come up.

This year, I vowed, would be my time. I would go see the gators. I would pet whatever there was to pet and I would look at whatever there was to look at.

And I did! The farm is about an hour and a half from where we stay in Colorado, so Steve dropped me off and went off and went on to do an errand of his own. He wanted to see the gators, but not for as long as I wanted to visit.

I walked into a long building full of glass of walls and aquariums. The containers contained boas up to 250 pounds and over 16 feet long, many of them former pets (and illegal in Oberlin, by the way). That's one big snake. Actually, the farm has about 15 big snakes, although they weren't all quite that big. There are also a few crocodiles.

Smaller aquariums held corn snakes, gopher snakes, rattlesnakes and lizards of all kinds.

Outside were ponds and ponds or alligators: big ones, bigger ones and humongous ones, including Morris, which has appeared on the Tonight Show and has starred in several movies, including Happy Gilmore and Dr. Doolittle 2.

I was in reptile heaven. I wandered all over the place, and when Steve arrived, we had our official picture taken with a small gator. Steve also took my picture with the little fellow and petting several tortoises, which have the run of the place, although there are two-foot fences every so often to keep them in separate areas.

These land turtles weigh in at 60 to 125 pounds, we were told. One went on a tear, knocking one of his smaller buddies over, then wedging himself in the ladies room. His keeper looked like she might spank him.

Visitors get a "certificate of bravery" for holding a gator. They seal it by having the gator chomp down on it, but if you ask me, he looked like he was tired of paper. So watch your hands.

It was a great trip. Maybe next year I can pet some of the snakes, but not the rattlers. Boas don't bite, do they?

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of NorWest Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes @ nwkansas.com

Mosque a defining issue for liberty

The angry and increasingly ugly debate over a proposed Islamic center in Lower Manhattan – misleadingly dubbed the "ground zero mosque" by the news media – raises troubling questions about the future of religious liberty in the United States.

An astonishing one-third of the American public, including 53 percent who identify themselves as Republicans, believe that Muslims do not have the constitutional right to build a mosque at the proposed site, according to a poll released this month by *The Economist*.

Even more disturbing, 34 percent say there are some places in the U.S. where it is not appropriate to build mosques, though it would be appropriate for other religions to build houses of worship. Fourteen percent believe that mosques should not be permitted anywhere in the U.S.

If this mosque debate is any measure of our national commitment to religious freedom, then these poll results are not encouraging.

Propaganda works. The drumbeat of anti-Islam messages this summer – often conflating Islam and terrorism – on talk radio, the Internet and at political meetings around the country has apparently convinced a good slice of the public that American Muslims do not have the same rights as people of other faiths.

The wholesale condemnation of Islam as inherently evil and violent, a viewpoint once confined to the political fringe, has become part of the mainstream discourse in New York – and has been repeated time and again at anti-mosque rallies this summer in California, Tennessee, Connecticut and elsewhere.

Although it should go without saying, let's be clear: American Muslims enjoy the same protection for religious freedom under the First Amendment as people of all other faiths. The

Other Opinions

• Charles C. Haynes
First Amendment Center

Muslim community group in Manhattan does have a constitutional right to build an Islamic center and mosque two and a half blocks north of ground zero.

More level-headed mosque opponents do recognize that right, but then go on to argue that it would be insensitive to put the Islamic center that near "hallowed ground." Although no doubt sincere, this argument implicitly accepts the notion that Islam itself – and not extremists who distort Islam – is at the root of the evil perpetrated on 9/11.

The best way to counter the al-Qaida version of Islam is not to move the Islamic center, but to build it as a representation of authentic Islam – and a symbol of the American commitment to full religious freedom and interfaith understanding.

Lest we forget, many American Muslims belong to families (including some of the "9/11 families" so often invoked in this debate) who have been in this country for generations – and consider themselves just as "American" as any of their neighbors.

Since the 2001 attacks, Muslim leaders in the U.S. have repeatedly condemned the terrorists who claim to represent Islam and have tried to educate the public about the true teachings of Islam. (For more about how American Muslims see this debate, visit www.groundzerodialogue.org.)

As reported recently in *The New York Times*, a two-year study of mosques in the U.S. conducted by scholars at Duke University and the University of North Carolina "concluded that contemporary mosques are actually a deterrent to the spread of militant Islam and terrorism" because mosque leaders "had put significant effort into countering extremism by building youth programs, sponsoring anti-violence forums and scrutinizing teachers and texts."

Rather than banning mosques – or moving them elsewhere – American communities should be welcoming them as allies in the campaign against extremism.

Attacks on Islam in America are not only wrong and dangerous, they are also devastating to millions of American Muslims who also care deeply about this country, especially Muslim citizens serving in the military. I received an e-mail this week from one of them, a soldier stationed in Afghanistan. Writing about the anti-mosque protests, he says this:

"As a Muslim in the U.S. Army, what has been hardest to endure is the insulting comments about my religion and those who practice it. Do we not deserve the right to worship freely and mourn for the people who died on 9/11? They were our countrymen, too."

He goes on to ask the question every American needs to ask whenever our ideals are sorely tested: "Do we really believe in and support the Constitution of the United States for the good of all?"

If we are unwilling to protect the right of every American to religious liberty, then we have no business sending this soldier to risk his life in the name of freedom and democracy.

Charles C. Haynes is director of the Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum, 555 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

