



The Hazards of Ensuring Safety

Back when my family vacationed in Miami Beach, it wasn't uncommon for the hotels abutting the shoreline to have high diving boards. I mean sometimes really high — maybe even the kind you see on Olympics telecasts. It was a scary jump for me as a child, but I think I mustered the courage once or twice. But I couldn't as an adolescent. You see, the boards were closed down by then (circa 1980), an obvious victim of our society's increasing litigiousness. Insurance regulations, you know.



And it's far worse today, as we're being lawyered and insured into an antiseptic, killjoy state. As an example, it's just been [announced](#) that elementary schools in Cabell County, West Virginia, are removing all swing sets for fear of litigation. A school official cited a recent lawsuit in which the district had to pay out \$20,000 after a boy broke his arm jumping off a swing à la Superman.

So the taxpayers got hosed again, but who was to blame? There are only two common reasons a child falls off a swing: Either he was too young to negotiate it on his own and the parents were remiss, or he was old enough but simply reckless. If the latter, he finds out he's not Superman but Stupid Boy, and, hopefully, grows up to be Wiser Man. In either case, it should be a learning experience, not an earning experience. Unfortunately, what the lad learned in this case was that your mistakes are always someone else's fault and should be viewed as an asset that can be parlayed into a payday.

And America has taken this lesson to heart. We've heard stories about schools that have banned the game tag during recess and even running, period, for "safety" reasons (and then they complain about childhood obesity and want to ban soda from school). Well, sure, imagine that — running in a playground. Call the therapist and get the Ritalin.

Yet our obsession with "safety" — a mantra of the modern man — is driven by far more than blood-sucking lawyers and litigants. It is, in fact, caused by a social pathology.

For one thing, it is part of a socialist mentality that collectivizes risk and responsibility, which results in everything from excusing individual criminality by blaming society to bailing out reckless investment houses to demanding that government provide health care. This may sound good to those receiving the largesse and conscience massages, but there's a downside not advertised: the loss of liberty.

With authority comes responsibility and with responsibility, authority. This is why children have little of either. After all, if adults have to be responsible for children's health, safety, and education, it follows that they will have to have the authority to control kids' health choices, actions, and study habits.



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on September 2, 2010

Likewise, the more you make government responsible for your life, the more authority it will exercise over you, the more you are acting like — and will be treated like — a child. So while people complain about the nanny state, they should complain about the juvenile state of a populace that refuses to grow into full adulthood.

Yet there are other causes of this social pathology. On a simple level, as people's lives become more comfortable, their expectations for things such as luxury, entertainment, and, yes, safety, become greater. Delving deeper, however, it's also part of the feminization of our culture.

Now, I'll be the first to admit that my sex can be quite reckless, but you ladies occupy the other end of the spectrum. As even [studies](#) and [surveys](#) have shown, women tend to be worrywarts. This quality obviously makes mothers more attentive to the needs of children; however, if it's not balanced with some fatherly adventurism, some women will smother their kids with mother-hen paranoia. Likewise, our society is being smothered by an entity so often characterized in the feminine: the nanny state.

But I believe the deepest reason is spiritual. When people have faith and look to an afterlife, they tend to be more concerned with spiritual health than the physical variety. To paraphrase Jesus, they will not fear that which destroys the body as much as that which destroys the soul. But what if you believe this life is all there is? Well, then the goal of staying in it as long as possible may rise to obsession. Where the believer may try to purge himself of sins to prepare for eternal life, the secularist may try to purge sins against the flesh to extend this ephemeral one. It's no coincidence that as atheism waxes, so does membership in the Cult of the Body.

Whatever the reasons, the pattern is unmistakable: We ever increase our expectations for safety as time progresses. Yet, as with laws and government programs, we don't ask, when will enough be enough? There was a time when cars didn't have seatbelts or airbags, when there were no childproof lids on medicine bottles, and I remember a high-school music teacher who joked about how a car his family owned in the 1950s had a protrusion-like fixture in the center of the steering wheel that could impale you during an accident. Yet people accepted this level of risk and didn't think to file lawsuits.

I am not saying all safety innovations are bad; I avail myself of many. But there are risks associated with trying too hard to avoid risks, and one is the loss of freedom and the joy of living. When I was a child, we could ride our bikes without helmets, and none of us cracked our skulls; we could be in the cargo area of a station wagon with a bunch of friends (it was a blast), as opposed to [strapped into child seats](#), and we didn't end up splattered on the windshield; in camp we competed in things such as the *tackle* version of "capture the flag" and boxing; and we played with toy guns that (gasp!) hadn't been sissified with girly colors. It was a more carefree life that we discarded without ever asking why the 1950, '60, '70 or '80 level of safety was insufficient. And will we ever say we're safe enough? Perhaps we'll just keep adding layers of safety measures until we're all living nice cloistered existences in well-regulated bubble wrap.

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