



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on April 3, 2020

Wear a Mask or Pay a Fine in Laredo

In the famous song, a young cowboy stepped out into the “Streets of Laredo.” In today’s Laredo, he would be wearing a mask — or face a fine for not doing so.

Last week, the city council of Laredo, Texas, enacted an ordinance that the town’s residents must now don a mask in public, covering their noses and mouths, or be slapped with a fine of up to \$1,000. The stated purpose of this new ordinance is to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus.



The provision dictates that all residents in Laredo over the age of five will wear a nose- and mouth-covering mask when entering public buildings, using public transportation, and when pumping gasoline.

Specifically, “This does not apply when a person is: engaging in a permissible outside physical activity; that are riding in a personal vehicle; that are alone in a separate single space; that are with their own shelter group (with other members of their household),” or when doing so would pose an even “greater” risk to health, safety, or security.

In addition to the order to wear a mask, residents will also face fines if they break the daily curfew, which will be in effect from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. During that time, residents “will be required to stay in their home,” and “may only leave for essential trips and necessities.”

Those who must work during those hours “will be exempt from this ordinance, but must show proof such as an I.D. or a letter from their employer.” To make sure that residents understand the regulation, the public notice of the ordinance added, “Laredo Police Officers will be enforcing this ordinance.”

The punishment for breaking curfew will be a fine of up to \$1,000, or “confinement in jail for a period not exceeding 180 days.”

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A spokesman for the city told the *Laredo Morning Times* that Laredo residents are still able to exercise outside during the curfew, just so long as such exercising is not done in a group.

The argument for such oppressive measures is, of course, that COVID-19 is a dire threat and it could spread and kill additional people. As of the passage of the ordinance, three individuals in the city have died from the virus, according to the city.

This draconian ordinance raises several questions. While one can certainly understand that concern over the coronavirus can lead individuals and cities to either practice or encourage certain precautionary measures to stop its spread, just how far can a city government — or any other government — go in controlling its population?

After all, if the government can order its citizens to wear a mask, just what else can it order them to wear? In Nazi Germany, Jews were ordered to wear yellow stars. In George Orwell’s dystopian novel



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1984, some citizens were ordered to wear uniforms. In Afghanistan, the Taliban authorities required women to wear burkas.

The curfew requirement also raises concerns, or at least it should to anyone with any sense of liberty or knowledge of history. A staple of many old movies depicting life in a totalitarian state, such as the old Soviet Union or National Socialist Germany under Hitler, was a citizen being stopped by a government officer and being asked, “Your papers, please.” Laredo joins Nazi Berlin and Communist Moscow in having law enforcement demanding “papers” from its citizens. One of the treasured rights of American citizens is the right to travel freely from city to city or state to state without such papers from their government.

Of course, we are told that all of these restrictions on our liberty are just temporary and extraordinary. Life will return to “normal” once this COVID-19 crisis has passed. But that is unlikely, if history is any guide. In the United States, the government’s power to spy on its own citizens, all in the name of protecting them from terrorists, increased dramatically after the 9/11 attacks.

Adam Schwartz, a senior staff attorney at Electronic Frontier Foundation in San Francisco, was quoted in *Bloomberg News*: “A primary concern is that if the public gives government new surveillance powers to contain COVID-19, then governments will keep those powers after the public health crisis ends. Nearly two decades after the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government still uses many of the surveillance technologies it developed in the immediate wake.”

In other words, the concern is that a precedent is now established; if the population is kept “safe” now, by these government-imposed draconian measures, why not just keep those powers to keep the population “safe” from some unseen virus that might be lurking out there at any given time?

After all, as many argue now, isn’t it worth curtailing our liberty, if it saves lives?

Under that reasoning, we should ground all airplanes on the chance that one of those big birds will crash.

The harsh truth is that many precedents have been established already that have prepared us for this present restriction on our liberty. Forcing citizens to wear seat belts in their own automobile is pretty much universal across America — all in the name of saving lives. While I wear my seat belt, it is really not the role of government to tell me to do that. One woman whom I discussed this with years ago told me that seat-belt laws were justified because injuries from car wrecks put stress on the healthcare system. Does that sound familiar?

Then there was the Affordable Care Act, with its individual mandate, forcing citizens to purchase a product (health insurance). Seriously, this seems to be a greater burden on the individual than forcing them to wear a mask during a pandemic, or to stay off the streets, unless one has his papers.

In ordinary times, any city council that ordered its own citizens to wear something or be fined would be voted out of office — or worse. But once the population accepts the premise that city councils, or any other government official, has the authority to order such things, we can expect more such commands.

As the great English political philosopher Lord Acton once said, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Petty tyranny leads directly to grand tyranny.



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