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Unintended side effects

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According to our count, from 1981 to 2003 there were 113 space shuttle missions that collectively carried about 655 people. Two missions ended with the loss of the crew, killing a total of 14 persons. Thus, an astronaut had about two chances out of hundred of being killed anytime he or she flew. If you had a chance to fly on the shuttle, and knew that you had about a 2 percent chance of getting killed, would you do it?

You may not, but clearly there are many people who would take the chance. Some very "extreme sports" or stunts probably have fatality rates of 2 percent or more, and people engage in them, knowing the danger. The shuttle, at least, has the advantage of adding to man's scientific knowledge. The question remains, how safe should space exploration be for the United States to engage in it? Flying in an airplane was very risky 100 years ago when the air age began, but people learned from mistakes and now airplane travel is the safest mode of transportation. For space travel to be as safe as air travel 100 years from now, the unfortunate fact is some will have to die in the meantime.

Scientific breakthrough involves risk, travel involves risk. In fact, everything we do involves risk. We cannot eliminate all risks, nor should we try. What we should do is educate ourselves about relative risks and then make informed decisions about which activities we wish to undertake.

The explorers and travelers across the Atlantic Ocean in the 1500s and 1600s experienced fatality rates of about 30 percent. Many of our ancestors were willing to take that extreme risk to bring their families to the new world. Over the years, safety did improve on the transatlantic voyages, but it was probably not until the age of steam that one could expect the present survival rate greater than that of a shuttle astronaut on such a voyage.

Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John and Abigail Adams all made multiple trips across the Atlantic, and knew that chances of dying on the voyage were well in excess of the 2 percent rate that the shuttle astronauts face. People were amazed that the Lewis and Clark team actually made it back without a large number of fatalities.

We are all rightly concerned about the deaths of our soldiers in Iraq, when an average of one a day is being killed. However, about one person a day is killed in Washington, and the vast majority of these deaths are among young males. The uncomfortable fact is that

an 18-year-old American living in our nation's capital has a greater chance of being killed than an 18-year-old American soldier in Iraq.

One can make a plausible argument that the Department of Homeland Security's Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) is unnecessarily killing us by unwittingly forcing people into automobiles, which are less safe than airplanes. Again, a few facts: No one was killed on a scheduled airline last year, which TSA bills as a great success. However, there has been a very big drop in airline passenger miles traveled. We know that some reasonable share of the drop in airline travel had to do with the lengthy delays caused by TSA, and their often unnecessarily degrading treatment of the traveling public. We know that many people, particularly on the shorter routes, have opted to drive rather than put up with the harassment of TSA. We also know that airline travel is about 20 times as safe as automobile travel. The preliminary data indicates that several hundred people may have died in their automobiles last year as a result of not flying.

It is obvious that TSA is not doing an adequate cost-benefit analysis. It is spending too much time and effort on seizing little old ladies' tweezers. A more rational approach would lead away from object fixation — Swiss Army knives, etc., which, in the pockets of most American males flying, make the plane safer, by giving them a weapon — to focusing on those individuals who are a real danger. Such an approach would make the airport experience more pleasant, which would get people out of their cars and back into airplanes, where they are safer.

Politicians and government bureaucrats are not good at recognizing the unintended consequences of their own actions. The Food and Drug Administration has long been more concerned about approving a drug that may kill someone, than delaying or not approving a drug that may save many lives.

A free and economically efficient society works best when people have information about relative risks. Government provides a service when it publicizes the statistics that airplanes are 20 times safer than automobiles, and that automobiles are 20 times safer than motorcycles or bicycles. It is good to know that cigarette smoking is harmful to one's health, that certain drugs have some side effects, and that too many calories and too much sugar may make you fat.

However, overly aggressive attempts by government to regulate or control some types of risky behavior in the population often have unintended side effects. Certain risks are worth taking for some people — some like to skydive. The real danger to our well being and future advancement is ignorance about the probabilities of various activities and behaviors. Most people, most of the time, will behave in a relatively rational manner, and thus government should leave them alone unless they are a clear and present danger to others.

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