

Excerpts from
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Bloomberg vs. The Car

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Give Mike Bloomberg points for political generalship in selling New Yorkers on his plan for traffic "congestion pricing."

Listen with half an ear to the mayor and his acolytes, however, and their goal isn't easing congestion at all. It's raising money. The city's plan foresees only negligible improvement in traffic density and speeds, less than 8%, but millions for the city to spend on other priorities.

The artificial deadline serves only to discourage the asking of too many questions.

The same goes for the mayor's constant invocation of a dubious scientific link between traffic pollution and childhood asthma. His supporters are now circulating flyers in New York on this theme.

Most of all, Mr. Bloomberg has made the running with those two words "congestion pricing." He doesn't call his scheme a "comprehensive vehicle surveillance" plan or "motorist vilification and taxation" plan -- apt but less saleable descriptions.

Mr. Bloomberg is inspired by London's use of camera-ruled congestion pricing in its downtown area. The Brits now have 6,000 cameras on their roadways, making theirs the most monitored society on earth.

In 2005, Britain's traffic cameras sent out 2.2 million speeding tickets in the mail -- nearly half for violations of less than 10 mph above the posted speed limit. Tens of thousands more tickets were sent to drivers who had been photographed talking on cell phones or committing other minor offenses. More than one million of Britain's 33 million drivers are now one ticket away from losing their licenses.

Advocates tout safety and teaching respect for the law, but the evidence suggests government is simply behaving like government -- going for the easy money. One-third of those ticketed by mail fail to respond and yet police don't track them down. Why bother when easy pickings are available from the majority of motorists who nervously write a check the instant a ticket arrives? Meanwhile, their quotas met, local authorities have been cutting the number of police patrolling the roads and able to intervene in truly dangerous situations where cameras are no help, such as with drunk and reckless drivers.

The BBC accurately identified the political dynamic at work here when it recently polled its audience: "Is motoring the new smoking?" London Mayor Ken Livingstone, when he's not penning op-eds in support of Mr. Bloomberg, is now busy working on plans to hit SUVs with higher "congestion fees" as punishment for global warming.

The system will also likely have face-recognition capability (if not right way, eventually) and will record each vehicle from many angles (and not just zoom in on the plates) to discourage drivers from challenging their fines in court.

The issue isn't cameras but networks of cameras, combined with software to extract information from the pictures and match it with information held in databases. On top of it all, the issue is an overpowering political incentive to use the system to extract more and more money from motorists (many of them out-of-state voters).
