

The Washington Post

washingtonpost.com

UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM Richard Morin

A Section

Diplomatic Scofflaws and the Culture of Corruption

Richard Morin

894 words

30 June 2006

The Washington Post

FINAL

A02

English

Copyright 2006, The Washington Post Co. All Rights Reserved

To a meter maid in New York City, here's the real axis of evil: Kuwait, Egypt and Chad.

At least that's what two economists found when they studied unpaid traffic tickets racked up over five years by diplomats from 146 countries stationed in New York City.

Raymond J. Fisman of Columbia University and Edward Miguel of the University of California at Berkeley wanted to see whether diplomats from more corrupt countries tended to ignore parking tickets more often than those from nations where boodle, bribes and fraud were less ubiquitous.

New York City, home to the United Nations, offered a perfect natural experiment to test their theory. It's a mecca for foreign diplomats, who have immunity from prosecution or lawsuits -- including parking laws -- when they are on assignment in the United States.

The first thing the economists wanted to know is whether some envoys took advantage of their diplomatic free pass to park in no-parking zones.

You bet.

Kuwait led the list of international parking scofflaws. Its diplomats each collected an average of 246.2 unpaid tickets annually during the 1997-2002 study period. Each of Egypt's statesmen averaged 139.6 tickets a year, while members of Chad's tiny delegation, which amounted to two diplomats in 1998, averaged 124.3. Sixteen countries collected more than 50 unpaid tickets per diplomat per year, while 22 had none. (To be fair, the violations could have been committed by staff or family members driving cars with diplomatic plates.)

For their study, Fisman and Miguel assembled city data on more than 150,000 unpaid parking tickets -- a total value of \$18 million -- issued to cars with diplomatic license plates between 1997 and 2002. They totaled the number of violations for each country, obtained the number of diplomats officially assigned to that mission and computed a ticket-per-envoy average.

Finally, they compared their list of scofflaws with a widely used composite index that ranks countries on the basis of how corrupt they are.

The correlation wasn't perfect. Still, the economists found "strong persistence in cultural norms: Diplomats from high-corruption countries have significantly more parking violations, and these differences persist over time."

Venezuelans Say: Hooray for Venezuela!

Americans lead the world when it comes to being proud of their country. But guess who's a close second: Venezuela, according to Tom W. Smith, director of the General Social Survey at the National Opinion Research Center.

Smith analyzed the results of surveys in 34 countries conducted by the International Social Survey program. People were asked how proud they were of their country in 10 areas of national life, including their political system, influence in the world, sports and science.

Americans ranked first in their overall sense of national pride, followed by Venezuela, then Ireland, South Africa, Australia and Canada.

What are we proudest of? Democracy, Smith said, as well as our military, influence in the world, and our achievements in science and economics. Venezuelans, on the other hand, led the world in pride over their accomplishments in sports, the arts and literature, history, and in their equal treatment of groups.

Something Else You Shouldn't Do When You Drink

Sometimes love hurts, and when it does, a shot of penicillin may be needed to make the pain go away. But there may be another way to keep sexually transmitted diseases in check: close down liquor stores.

The number of "neighborhood alcohol outlets appear[s] to be significantly associated with changes in gonorrhea rates," reported a study team headed by Deborah A. Cohen of the Rand Corp.

The researchers examined gonorrhea rates in Los Angeles neighborhoods hit hardest by the 1992 riots. After the unrest, 270 liquor stores closed because of arson and vandalism.

The researchers found that more than 90 percent of the change in the incidence of gonorrhea cases per 100,000 people could be explained by the closing of neighborhood liquor stores. One fewer liquor store per mile of roadway "was associated with 21 fewer gonorrhea cases per 100,000 in tracts affected by the unrest compared to those not affected," Cohen and her colleagues wrote in a study published in the latest issue of *Social Science and Medicine*.

Who Would Have Thought?

Lifelines, Seeing Things and Good-Looking Pols

* "Who Really Wants to be a Millionaire? Estimates of Risk Aversion from Gameshow Data" by Roger Hartley, Gauthier Lanot and Ian Walker. Warwick University Economic Research Papers. British economists determine that the "Ask the Audience" lifeline is "almost as valuable as '50-50' and 'Phone a Friend' together."

* "Anomalous Experiences in North Carolina: A Survey" by William J. Dewan. *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 39 No. 1. A University of New Mexico doctoral student surveys college students in North Carolina and finds nearly one in four report having supernatural experiences, including sightings of "phantom rockets" and "ghost lights" in the night sky.

* "Candidate Appearance Cues in Low-Information Elections" by Susan A. Banducci et al. Working paper presented at the American Political Science Association annual convention. A team of U.S. and British political scientists find that better-looking and white candidates, regardless of experience, do better in community council elections that feature photos of candidates on the ballot.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com>

WP20060630WISDOM30

Document WP00000020060630e26u0003h

© 2006 Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive LLC (trading as Factiva). All rights reserved.