

Keep Your Eyes on the Road

By Reg P. Wydeven
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When I was a janitor in the summers during college, my boss and I would occasionally go golfing. The first time we went he offered me a cigar. Wanting to look cool, I accepted. When we got to the tee box, my boss put his cigar on a little stand and proceeded to tee off. Scoffing at his cute little stand, I hopped up to the tee, cigar in mouth, and took a gigantic backswing. At my driver's apex, my cigar burned through my shirt sleeve and into my left bicep. After a severely uncool yelp, I punched my ball at a 90° angle into the parking lot.

Needless to say, this is just one example of many that proves I am incapable of doing two things at once. Apparently many Americans suffer from the same problem. That's why last week President Obama signed an executive order banning federal employees from text messaging while driving.

The order was issued as a result of the two-day Distracted Driving Summit, which was a gathering in Washington, D.C. of 300 federal and state officials to discuss the hot button issue of using cell phones and iPods while driving. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that at any given moment during daylight hours, 812,000 drivers are using hand-held cell phones, which equates to 11 percent of the vehicles on the road. Consequently, the NHTSA also reported that last year 15% of driver deaths in the U.S., or 5,870 people, were the result of distracted driving. The agency did not indicate how many of those incidents were related to texting, however.

The executive order specifically forbids federal employees from text messaging while they are behind the wheel of government vehicles, and also from texting in their own cars if they are using government-issued phones or if they are on official government business. In addition, the order also instructs executive departments and government agencies to encourage contractors and other companies that do business with the government to adopt and enforce policies banning their employees from texting while driving on official government business.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced the executive order at the conclusion of the Summit. LaHood kicked off the event by saying, "To put it plainly, distracted driving is a menace to society." To combat this, LaHood proclaimed that his department is also developing permanent restrictions on the use of mobile devices by rail operators, interstate truck and bus operators, and school bus drivers, though the specifics of these restrictions have not yet been hammered out.

Legislation was recently introduced in Congress that proposes to withhold 25 percent of federal highway dollars from states that fail to pass their own laws banning texting while driving. This same tactic worked effectively when the federal government wanted states to reduce the legal intoxication limit to a .08 blood alcohol level and to increase the drinking age to 21. Presently, eighteen states and the District of Columbia have laws on the books banning hand-held texting by drivers.

Many officials were relieved to hear LaHood's announcement about the executive order. President Obama was unable to announce the order himself because he had to fly to Copenhagen, Denmark, to lobby for having the Olympics in Chicago. On his way out, Obama promised to announce the order on Twitter while driving to the airport.