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## Celebrating quasi-freedom

By: John R. Lott Jr. and Brad Thor- July 5, 2013

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July Fourth might be the day we celebrate freedom, but can America still truly be called the land of the free? Even for something as basic as our health care, we need government approval. We can't buy 75-watt or above incandescent bulbs. Our children face disciplinary action for playing with imaginary guns. Don't think we're drowning in regulations and government overreach? Try setting up a small business.

But as crazy as these examples are, the list goes on:

As our government collects data on whom we call, how long we talk, and where we are when we do our talking, can America still be classified as free? How about when our government collects all of our e-mails, texts, and credit-card transactions without a warrant or reasonable suspicion - despite the protections of the Fourth Amendment?

Add 26 U.S. senators expressing concern that the National Security Agency may also be collecting information on our pharmacy and library records, gun purchases, and financial information.

In its defense, the government has assured us that it would never, ever, ever abuse its power. Really? Isn't the Internal Revenue Service supposed to be prohibited from basing tax decisions on politics? How about never releasing private tax information to unauthorized persons, much less a citizen's political opponents or appointees in the White House?

The liberty-gobbling PacMan, though, doesn't stop there. Did you know that the federal government requires hotels to examine guests' IDs and maintain records so that it can determine who stayed where and on what days?

Did you also know that the Food and Drug Administration threatened to ban the sale of Cheerios because of two claims printed on the box: "Cheerios is clinically proven to reduce cholesterol 4 percent in 6 weeks" and "Cheerios can help reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, by lowering the 'bad' cholesterol." The claims were accurate. But unless the claims were removed, Cheerios would be classified as a drug and would not be allowed to be sold until it had passed FDA safety testing.

Speaking of the FDA, if someone is dying from cancer, the government won't let them try medicines or procedures that haven't yet received government approval - even if that approval takes more years than that person has to live.

Of course, bans and regulations don't just flow from the federal government.

In New York state, it is illegal to rent out your condominium or apartment for a time period of less than a month.

In Los Angeles, it is illegal to use smart phone apps for on-demand ride-sharing or as a means by which drivers can sign up to give rides in exchange for cash.

In Massachusetts, legal gun ownership has fallen 86 percent over the last 13 years, as a sheriff's permission is needed to own a gun. In other places, such as Washington, D.C., it can cost \$534 to license and register a handgun, so that only the wealthy are able to afford them.

In what might be the ultimate irony this July Fourth weekend, Americans in many states are even banned from buying fireworks to celebrate their "freedom."

There are, of course, more systematic ways of measuring this lost freedom. The libertarian Cato Institute has published the Economic Freedom of the World Index since 1980. The U.S. ranking has plunged from sixth in 2008 to 18th in 2010 (the last year for which Cato's rankings are available). Rankings from the Wall Street Journal and the Heritage Foundation, as well as the World Economic Forum, show similar declines.

Some losses of our freedom have happened slowly, while others have occurred rapidly in the last few years. No matter how you look at it, though, America is no longer the free nation it once was. In fact, as we are trending down, other parts of the world have seen clear improvements in freedom over the last 30 years.

Even so, the United States has bounced back from past restrictions on freedom, such as after the New Deal or the 1970s wage and price controls, and we can do it again.

Yes, we all have busy lives, but we must not allow ourselves to be complacent and uninformed in matters of current events and politics. We must no longer tolerate it in our friends, family, neighbors, or coworkers either. There is no greater threat to our liberty than our exploding government and the voters who empower it.

To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, let us never forget that those who would trade a little liberty for a little security deserve neither and will lose both.