



5 horrifying things companies used to get away with before government regulation

James Dennis

January 25, 2017

Government regulations have a bad rap in the business world, and a top promise from President Donald Trump's administration has been to do away with burdensome rules: One reason, perhaps, the stock market is flying high.

Most recently, Trump promised to scuttle environmental regulations disliked by car companies, which might include President Barack Obama's fuel standards.

But one particularly surprising claim Trump has made about regulatory reform came Monday, when the president suggested he would do away 75% of United States regulations, according to an *NPR* report.

That's an eye-popping number.

Even Peter Van Doren, a conservative economist who edits the Cato Institute's journal *Regulation* didn't think there was any credibility to the figure, telling *NPR* reform is "gonna be probably somewhere in the moderate to small range."

Americans should hope Van Doren is right — as Columbia economics professor W. Bentley MacLeod previously explained to *Mic* in a post-election interview about why Trump's presidency worries economists.

"Regulation exists for good reason and we should be very careful," MacLeod said. "People don't learn things are bad until they experience them."

Yes, it's certainly true regulations often outlive their usefulness: Few tears were shed, for instance, when New York moved to scrap Prohibition-era rules preventing restaurants from serving booze before noon.

But for every silly rule, there is a law that protects American freedoms and lives. Take the Americans with Disabilities Act — or rules on workplace safety.

To that end, here are five awful business practices that were perfectly acceptable throughout U.S. history, until outrage mounted and the government stepped in.

1. Selling rotting, contaminated meat.

When President Theodore Roosevelt was a young man, he was a classic, "laissez faire" Republican who did not believe in regulating the markets.

One of the things that changed his mind was reading Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, a novel depicting the atrocities of the early industrial meat-packing industry, where rotted meat was often doctored up as sold as sausage.

After he corroborated the findings, Roosevelt signed the Meat Inspection Act in 1906, which laid the foundation for the modern Food and Drug Administration.

2. Making cars without seat belts.

Fun fact: Automotive companies were initially hesitant to install seat belts in their cars for fear that their cars would be perceived as unsafe.

It was only with the passage of the Highway Safety Act of 1966 which required seat belts and other safety measures before their use became commonplace.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, seat belts save more than 15,000 lives a year.

3. Marketing cigarettes to minors.

Until the 2009 Tobacco Control Act, the tobacco industry would often stealthily market to minors by selling cigarettes through vending machines (which can't ask for ID), giving away free samples, or doing marketing events at sporting or cultural events.

The industry also has a history of targeting teens with cartoon characters in ads, the most famous of which was probably Joe Camel.

Indeed, some argue that the National Rifle Association is starting to do the very same thing — making an adult product look fun for kids — with guns.

4. Letting employees touch your food without washing their hands.

Ever heard of Typhoid Mary, a turn-of-the century domestic chef who continued to work in kitchens even after it was discovered she was giving everyone she worked for typhoid fever?

No?

Well for that you can thank the United States Occupational Safety and Health Administration, signed into law in 1970 by President Richard Nixon, which is credited with reducing workplace fatalities by 62%.

They're also the people behind those "Employees must wash their hands before returning to work" signs which at least one US senator reportedly opposes.

5. Pumping the air with mercury and arsenic.

Trump has often promised to be a friend to the coal industry, and that's prompted some environmentalists to worry he might scrap the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, a regulation that coincided with 30% of the coal plant retirement in 2015.

The problem?

Both mercury and arsenic have been linked to increased risk for cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death worldwide.