

1984 is happening now – Part Six

*Relax, said the Nightman,  
We are programmed to receive.  
You can check out any time you want  
But you can never leave.  
–Hotel California by Henley & Frey*

How does that OnStar radio commercial go?

The thankful woman gushes something like “Praise the Lord for OnStar.”

You might want to reconsider that praise, good sister, considering what OnStar will lead to.

Oh yes, right now *OnStar* is a great deal. But understand that the service can potentially turn your vehicle into a spy and, ultimately, your jailor.

Utilizing 24 globally positioned satellites and a network of omnipresent cell phone towers, OnStar provides motorists with several amenities.

The information on the company’s Web site, [onstar.com](http://onstar.com), explains that “OnStar can flash your exterior lights and sound your horn so you can find your vehicle. With a far greater range than remote key controls, OnStar can help even when your vehicle is at the opposite end of a crowded parking lot.”

What happens if a whole bunch of OnStar subscribers are using that service in the same packed parking lot at the same time? Good luck with that. I mean, did we lose the gene responsible for locating our cars?

Ever lock yourself out of your vehicle?

Well, you need never worry about doing that again because OnStar can unlock your doors.

But did you ever stop to think that if your doors can be remotely unlocked, they can also be locked with you inside?

OnStar’s Web site states the service can “Run a remote diagnostic check of your engine. Tell you whether to continue driving or find a safe place to stop and wait for roadside assistance.”

If Onstar can do a diagnostic on your engine and advise you to either drive on or pull over, that capability can also control your vehicle.

What if you are driving over the speed limit by five or 10 miles an hour? No cops around. Your home free, right?

Not necessarily.

More and more incidents are occurring in which those who speed are being “watched” by companies hired to monitor them through the same GPS and cellular network that Onstar utilizes.

In “Big Brother is Driving,” a June 3rd, 2004 article that appeared in *The New Haven Advocate*, reporter Colleen Van Tassell detailed how Connecticut resident James Turner sued Acme Rent-a-Car, which contracted Canadian-based AirIQ, a satellite service provider, to track its vehicles.

Air IQ determined that Turner was speeding and, based on that information, Acme withdrew \$450 from Turner’s bank account—without his permission—for the alleged violation.

Now speeding isn't a good thing, but we all do it, even if it's not flagrant.

Is this just cause, though, to circumvent an individual's right to a trial? Is it okay that a corporation could usurp law enforcement powers?

Van Tassell wrote: "Acme had its own system of justice: None. Had state troopers caught him speeding, Turner would've benefited from a court system. Instead, he was stripped of any due process in Acme's lawless world."

NBC-TV's San Diego affiliate covered the story of an Arizona man who was fined \$1,800 for crossing a state line with a vehicle rented from a company that proscribed such. The NBC news show, "7/39," reported that "The policy is legal, assuming the company lets customers know they are being tracked by GPS."

A co-worker of mine had a horror story, too. She recounted that, while traveling the English countryside in a rental car, her husband exceeded the speed limit once by eight miles. When they returned from their trip, they found in their mail a fine assessed by the rental company in British currency, which was the equivalent of over \$100 and included a provision for exponentially increasing the fine if not paid by certain dates.

Another questionable development in the automotive world—one being driven by insurance companies—is the factory installation of data control devices, the "black boxes," that store information about speed, throttle position, braking, airbag deployment, and seatbelt engagement.

What's the problem with that?

David Fraser, head of the privacy practice at the Canadian law firm McInnes Cooper, said it succinctly in a recent *Business Week* article entitled "The Spy Under the Hood": "Once you start collecting information, there's always an impulse to collect more and more."

In that same article, General Motor spokesman Alan Adler tried to offer some assurance: "It's important for people to understand that they [black boxes] don't record conversations or information on where you are driving or anything like that."

That's not completely true. Monitoring and tracking are being done now. Currently, for that to happen, you must be a willing participant through the purchase of OnStar or the rental of a vehicle equipped with GPS.

However, when tracking technology becomes standard in all vehicles, it won't matter whether you're a willing participant or not.

We should stop and think about what might be in store for us tomorrow before we lovingly embrace technology today. Though it may provide convenience and a degree of safety and security, technology comes with an inherent downside:

It can be turned on you.

And, as George Orwell was trying to tell us, it will.

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