

EDITORIAL

Taking it out on Uncle Sam

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Two economists from Columbia University and the University of California-Berkeley have found that unpaid New York City parking tickets by diplomats correlate strongly with the degree of dislike of the United States in polls of the diplomat's home country.

Interestingly, unpaid tickets also correlated with corruption in the home country, but not significantly with whether the home country was Muslim.

Traditionally, diplomatic immunity meant that nothing could happen to diplomats who didn't pay their tickets. But this infuriated New Yorkers burdened by the in-your-face parking habits of more than 1,700 members of missions to the United Nations from 146 countries, and Congress enacted what appear to be effective reforms.

All along, some well-mannered countries have paid any tickets their diplomats racked up, or made them park legally.

According to the study by Columbia's Ray Fisman and Berkeley's Edward Miguel of tickets issued in New York from 1997 through 2002, diplomats from the following countries had no unpaid tickets: Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Norway, Sweden, Canada, Israel, Australia, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Oman, Jamaica, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Azerbaijan, Burkina Faso and the Central African Republic. Note the number of traditional American friends.

Russia's 86 New York diplomats, the largest foreign contingent, accumulated only two tickets per person each year. Germany averaged one. France had six, Spain 13 and Italy 15.

Here's the "dirty dozen" - countries with the most: Kuwait, 246 per person per year; Egypt, 140; Chad, 124; Sudan, 119; Bulgaria, 118; Mozambique, 111; Albania, 85; Senegal, 79; Pakistan, 69; Ivory Coast, 67; Zambia, 60.

What contempt from some ostensible friends - on the average, each of the nine Kuwaitis got a ticket almost every working day; each of the 24 Egyptians, one every other working day.

In 2002, Congress passed a law deducting from foreign aid allocations the amount of money owed in unpaid fines, giving the money to New York City, and giving the city the right to tow offending cars and seize their diplomatic parking permits. Unpaid tickets fell from about 3,100 per month to about 50.

No doubt New Yorkers are pleased. But we wonder: What else are these diplomats getting away with?

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