

Escalation and Obedience

Airports and airlines, governed by federal law, never relaxed their mask mandate, even for the fully vaccinated. Yet if you actually fly nowadays, you'll notice plenty of scofflaws on the ground and in the sky.

Which raises a big question: What exactly is the punishment for failing to wear a mask?

Until you board the plane, the punishment is simply: An authority orders you to put on your mask. Once they're out of sight, you can safely remove your mask until another authority orders you to put on your mask. As long as you wear your mask in the security line, you probably won't even experience this minor punishment. From what I've seen, airport enforcement is now near-zero. Airport police walk past scofflaws in silence. Some of the police are wearing their masks below the nose themselves.

Once you're on the plane, however, the strategic situation changes. Some flight attendants just look the other way. Others, however, are actively hunting for scofflaws. So what kind of punishments do these enforcers mete out?

For the first offence, the sky is the same as the ground: They order you to wear your mask. But since you're stuck together in a flying tube, you can't simply obey, wait for the enforcer to disappear, then remove your mask again. If the attendant cared enough to enforce the rule once, they care enough to keep enforcing it. And each time they ask, they *escalate*. The first pseudo-polite "request" becomes a stern order. Then they start threatening to report you to the authorities. I've seen the situation reach this level more than once.

Are these all empty threats? Probably, but only probably. If you're ordered to put your mask on six times on a single flight, perhaps there will be a police officer waiting for you when you exit the plane. How far you can push your luck? I'm not the right person to ask. What I am confident of, however, is that if you bluntly defy the flight attendant, there is at least a 20% chance that the police officer will be waiting for you when you land. And if you combine your defiance with profanity, I'm confident that the odds that the police are waiting for you rises to at least 35%.

Escalation. If you really pay attention, that's the standard mechanism of government coercion. You can break most of the laws most of the time. But once you're on the government's radar, they keep ramping up the punishment until you back down. Speeding goes unpunished 99.9% of the time. Once you get a ticket, however, you'd better pay it. If you don't, the amount you owe keeps rising. Eventually, you'll probably lose your driver's license. If you then drive without a license, they'll arrest you. If you keep driving without a license, they'll jail you. And if you vigorously resist that, they'll kill you.

The same applies, as libertarians have been saying for ages, to taxation. No agent of the government has ever held a gun to my head and told me, "Pay your taxes or I'll kill you." But the government *will* predictably escalate to gunplay if you are loudly defiant. Indeed, you could say that predictable escalation is the essence of government. Almost everyone else in society peacefully backs down if you refuse to obey them. In the classic Milgram "obedience to authority" experiment, self-styled authorities kept subjects in line with solemn words like:

The experiment requires that you continue.

It is absolutely essential that you continue.

You have no other choice, you must go on.

Nevertheless, subjects were perfectly free to flatly say, "No" and walk away. And about a third of Milgram's subjects ultimately did.

Government does not work that way. Government will not accept "No" as your final answer. You can hide, you can weasel, you can even get a lawyer. Still, if you stubbornly and openly refuse to obey the government, it will probably kill you. Act accordingly.