

## Eyesores R Us

by Thomas C. Reeves

The hottest trend in American advertising, next to the Internet, is the digital outdoor billboard. One can now drive down a freeway and be exposed to enormous signs featuring pictures in a slide-show style that flip to new advertisers every few seconds. Today there are some 500 such signs, and the number is expected grow many times over in the next few years. There are already between 450,000 and 500,000 billboards on the nation's highways, and the number keeps increasing. Spending on outdoor advertising in 2006 rose more than 6%, to \$23.3 billion.

Each year more than 200 communities try to set limits on what Scenic America, an anti-billboard lobbying group, calls 'litter on a stick' and "the junk mail of the American highway." The advertising companies often win because they tie up local officials with lawsuits and the threat of future litigation. A single company, Clear Channel, owns 75,000 billboards across the country, and efforts to restrain its growth have been relatively ineffective. The billboard industry has had no trouble in sidestepping the toothless Highway Beautification Act of 1965. (See [http://ga3.org/scenic\\_america/hba\\_assault.html](http://ga3.org/scenic_america/hba_assault.html).)

Drive north from Chicago and see the visual squalor that Wisconsin offers on both sides of I-94. Keep going and you'll see why Scenic America has named Wisconsin Dells the "most blighted" vacation area in America. In the heat of summer, some 70,000 people a week pour into the Dells, guided by billboard blight that begin nearly 100 miles away.

(See <http://www.scenicwisconsin.org/adhtml.htm>)

One can imagine much of the country invisible from the road as huge electronic signs dominate the landscape. Who wants to see the Great Plains, the Pacific Ocean, or the great forests of this land when we can watch commercials for rock stations, toilet paper, and (on the same level) the latest movies? Of course, some drivers may not pay much attention to the signs as they are on the cell phone and snatching glimpses of its commercials. The kids in the back seat may not look up, concentrating on the ads in their gadgets. Who wants to look at lakes when we can see ads for the new 760 calorie burger or low slung jeans?

Television advertising is also booming, of course. In Spain, television ads are now presented in 15-minute blocks, causing many viewers to forget what they were watching. Product placement in programs is routine and obvious. The advertising industry in this country is clearly on the same path. There were almost as many stories about the Super Bowl commercials as there were about the game itself. On many channels, commercials often appear on screen even when programs are in progress. Some channels devote 40 to 50 percent of each hour to commercials and promotions. (Some sales channels, of course, are nothing but commercials, and viewers understand that when they tune in.) Go to

a movie theater and sit through 20 to 25 minutes of commercials before the previews start. The theaters themselves are often in hideous strip malls, surrounded by billboards.

This is all part of the uglification (as a friend calls it) and the dumbing down of America. Nothing will be done about this descent unless intelligent, sensitive, and courageous people object. Action should be prompt, for young people are growing up without an alternative, and many clearly have grown to love the commercials that surround their every waking hour. The ratings company Arbitron, Inc. reports that two-thirds of moviegoers have no problem with the ads. The ability to recite commercials verbatim is the most certain intellectual achievement of the majority of American youth.

This is a cause that might have bipartisan appeal; the most enlightened Republicans and Democrats could take steps to minimize advertising on the highways and in the media — for the national good. If we can attack urban blight by removing slums and decrepit public housing units, why not at least restrain the visual and intellectual blight that assaults us in omnipresent advertising? If we can stop hucksters from telephoning us at dinner time, why can't we stop the hucksters who turn television stations, movie theaters, and cell phones into sales machines and litter our highways with gigantic signs?

Yes, I'm all for business and public prosperity. But neither would be seriously threatened by using some common sense about the eyesores of advertising. (See Scenic America for the facts on this issue.) Let us talk about the quality of life in this country, without which all the cash in the world means little.