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Individualism in Overdrive

By **FRANK BRUNI**

Having exhorted Americans toward six-pack abs and schooled them in 15-minute orgasms, the personal improvement guru Tim Ferriss turned his attention more recently to travel advice. It appeared in The Times on Sunday, and it said a lot about what's wrong with our country.

Ferriss is the self-anointed superhuman who hawks not just the possibility of perfection, as defined by gobs of dough and a godly physique, but the speediness of it. Just heed his mega-selling books and you too can attain “The 4-Hour Workweek” and “The 4-Hour Body,” thus having quadruple or quintuple that time left over for self-adoration.

And for trips! Ferriss apparently jets around a whole bunch, a guru being only as good as his frequent-flier status, so his dominion extends to the heavens. He is master of air as well as earth. One of the tips he shared in The Times was this: if you must check a bag, pack an **unloaded starter pistol** in it, so that the Transportation Security Administration will flag the piece of luggage, thus diminishing or altogether eliminating the possibility of its loss. It's extra work and fretting for them but, hey, *you* get peace of mind. Isn't that what counts?

To Ferriss's thinking, yes, and I fear he's not exotic in this regard. While I doubt there will be a rush on starter pistols by airline passengers — it's just too much trouble, and too bizarre — his overarching interest in gaming the system at hand is mirrored in other Americans' behavior. So is his emphasis on personal advantage over the public good, which would be undermined if every traveler did as he counseled. There'd be bedlam in airport security operations and a ludicrous number of people carrying around what could be mistaken for lethal weapons.

Selfishness run amok is a national disease (and, to judge by Greece, Italy and a few other European countries, an international epidemic). Too many people

behave as if they live in a civic vacuum, no broader implications to their individual behavior.

They game, connive, cheat. Sometimes it's small stuff: the perfectly healthy man who presents a sham doctor's note so that his 60-pound pooch can be designated a "service dog" and thus accompany him into a lounge where pets aren't allowed.

Sometimes it's more consequential: perfectly (or at least mostly) healthy people bilking the government. Over the last four decades, the number of Americans drawing Social Security disability insurance has more or less tripled, by some estimates. That well outpaces population growth and reflects not just a liberalization of the requirements to apply for such insurance but the readiness of some people who don't truly need it to finesse the criteria nonetheless.

I've known a few of them. I bet you have, too. Making a mockery of all the Americans who rightly depend on such aid, they exaggerate impairments, pressuring doctors to validate their conditions, on the theory that no harm is really done, not when they're suckling at a teat as elastic and amorphous as the federal Treasury.

But that treasury is the sum of us — of our deposits and withdrawals — and to cheat it is to cheat your neighbor. It's really that simple.

You wouldn't know this from the way people approach taxes, which are what the federal Treasury must take in if it's going to spit out anything at all — for the military, the highways and a whole lot else. Americans most frequently boast of how little they manage to pay, crowing about accounting gimmicks exploited, tricks successfully tried. I'm all for cunning, but we've gone beyond that.

Looking out for No. 1 is the pox on our politics. No industry wants to let go of a loophole and no constituency acquiesces to a significant sacrifice without being assured first that other industries or constituencies are doing as much or more. And even then they hesitate.

I'm ceaselessly surprised by how many older people of means push back against necessary changes to Social Security and Medicare. Some of them are grandparents, maybe even doting ones. And there's a crucial disconnect between their impulse to safeguard their slice of the American pie and the concern they

should feel for the crumbs their grandchildren may be left with.

A few of them are surviving members of the “greatest generation,” which we justly lionize for its sacrifices. Where are our sacrifices today? Our investments in the greater good?

In ourselves we invest plenty. Ferriss’s success speaks to that. Advocating what amounts to an epic narcissism, he has ruled the best-seller list and become rich.

Still he schemes.

Don’t pay for airport parking, he advised in *The Times*, if the accrued tickets from leaving your car on the street won’t be as expensive. Sure, you’re unlawfully hogging a space someone else might make legal use of; maybe you’re thwarting street sweepers, too. Not your problem. A conscience is for chumps.

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