

# No Mercy for Robo-Callers!

*Editor's Note: This is a non-member column (open to all).*

One year ago this month I wrote a column about the appalling human beings who on a daily basis make our lives miserable, who disrupt our peace of mind, and who steal money from the most vulnerable and unsophisticated among us. I was writing about a noxious bunch of slugs. Robo-callers.

Since I wrote that column, things have changed. They've gotten worse!

A story in this month's Consumer Reports tells us that, "By every measure, the number of unwanted robocalls to our cell phones and landlines has reached an epidemic level, and if you think the crisis has grown exponentially worse in just the past year, that's because it has. In 2018, a record 48 billion robocalls were placed to phones in the U.S., according to YouMail, a company that blocks and tracks robocalls. That works out to 1,500 robocalls per second—which is 56.8 percent more robocalls than there were in 2017."

Forty-eight *billion* calls last year. One thousand five hundred calls – *per second!* Let that sink in.

Last year I wrote that, "I don't know about you but my phones – landline *and* cell – are ringing non-stop with warnings about my computer, with offers for me to buy medical insurance, with deals to lower the interest rate on my credit cards, with giveaways for free trips to exotic places and much, much more."

"Sometimes the caller is a real human being," I wrote. A lot of times the caller is a guy named Kenny or Billy ... from Mumbai. Other times they're recordings that sound eerily like a real person. 'Hi, this is Tina, can you hear me?' When you answer it prompts the recording to continue with the pitch.

Just between us, when 'Tina' asks if I can hear her, I ask Tina a question that we can't repeat in this space."

I signed up, as many of you have, on the Do Not Call Registry, but that's pretty much useless. The Registry can't keep up with the constantly changing phone numbers robocallers use – number that often show the same area code and first three digits as our own numbers on caller I.D. to make us think it's a legitimate call from someone we know.

For the record, not all calls are illegal scams. It's legal for political parties and charities to reach us through robocalls. Same with the pharmacy telling us our prescription is ready. Credit card companies can robo call us to say a payment is due. But a lot are not legal.

"According to YouMail, of the robocalls placed in 2018, 40 percent were scam calls trying to trick consumers into giving away valuable personal information or defraud them out of their money," according to Consumer Reports.

The most common scams, the Consumer Reports investigation concluded, are about the IRS and Social Security. "In the IRS scam, the caller may threaten you with jail if you don't pay taxes he claims you owe, insisting that you pay immediately or he'll dispatch the police. In the Social Security scam, the caller might say your file lacks necessary personal information, such as your Social Security number. Or she may claim to need additional information to increase your benefit payment, or threaten to terminate your benefits if you don't confirm the information she has."

Congress wants to pass laws to penalize these weasels – with fines. It won't work. The robocallers will simply write off the fines as a cost of doing business. And major telecom companies are trying to deal with the problem, but the robocallers always seem to be one step ahead of the efforts to shut them down.

The calls come in while you're having dinner; they come in while you're watching TV; the phone rings when you're reading a book or talking to your kids. We'd never tolerate it if a bunch of strangers rang our doorbell at home all day long. Why do we put up with this?

These people must be punished.

So in my column last year, I proposed a better a solution, a better solution than imposing fines on these loathsome creeps – even better than a long stretch in the slammer.

“I pretty much support the death penalty but only when the crime is especially heinous and guilt of the perpetrator is certain beyond almost any kind of doubt, “ I wrote. “That’s why I’m for capital punishment for those who have caused so much pain and suffering in America, who have disrupted so many innocent lives. Yes, I’m talking about the slugs responsible for robocalls.”

I was angry when I wrote that. I probably had just received a robocall from Kenny in Mumbai offering me a free trip to the Caribbean if I give him just two pieces of information: my social security number and my mother’s maiden name.

Now a full year has gone by and I’ve had time to reflect on the harsh words I wrote in 2018. And so today, I have second thoughts. And they’re exactly the same as my first thoughts.