Weekend, there were lots of visitors buying many bottles of wine, and many glasses of wine were being tasted. And there, on the side of the majestic stone building with the ivy climbing on it, was another elegant, polished-brass warning sign. This one was the familiar one we read (with much difficulty because of the size of the print) on the label of wine bottles and beer cans: that wine contains alcohol that can be harmful to pregnant women and — surprise, surprise! — that too much of the stuff can impair one's ability to drive a vehicle or operate machinery. It then struck me that the whole purpose of such signs was not to warn the unwary of evil substances lurking in the liquid, but rather the scheme was a symbiotic relationship between the regulators and the regulatees. That is, the governmental regulators don't actually want to discourage the drinking of wine; after all, it is a multibillion-dollar business. The regulatees can piously show their compliance with the law by posting signs, well aware that not one person in all the millions who visit the Napa Valley will be discouraged from drinking wine by reading the signs. Every winery in the Napa Valley displays such signs.

This practice is similar to the posting of "Drug-Free Zone" signs in the neighborhoods where dope dealers abound. The posting of the signs is cheap, doesn't require additional police, doesn't get into the nasty social and economic questions of illegal drugs, and demonstrates to the populace that the city government is doing something about the "drug problem". The message is clear: we can solve social, public health, and environmental problems by slogans alone.

The recent antics by members of the Louisiana legislature in attacking the Department of Environmental Quality for doing its job too well leads me to propose a warning sign to be posted at bus terminals, airports, and on all roads leading into the state. The signs should read: "WARNING. This State Contains Members of its Legislature who have been Determined to be (and are determined to be) Dangerous to Your Health. Exercise Caution While Eating, Drinking, and Breathing." Maybe those signs will get more attention than the hotel warnings and the whining wine signs.