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Press Here to Control the Universe

Pedestrians who dutifully pressed those buttons to get a walk signal at busy New York intersections have to be miffed. It turns out the buttons usually won't give them the green light any sooner. The buttons — 3,250 of them — became obsolete with computer-controlled traffic lights. According to the city, fewer than 20 percent are still wired to do the job. The rest are props, teasing the hurried and law-abiding to believe they have some control.

Truth is, any button that promises a response controls people. It gets them when they are needy. Open a garage door, operate a microwave oven, turn on the TV — all done by pressing buttons. Generations since the 1950's have been trained for life at the touch of a button. Boot up a computer, make a doll talk, brew coffee — all impossible without pushing away. In a high-rise, there are buttons to contend with on the elevator, plus the fact that someone is always running to catch it just when the doors are shutting. A character test: Do you hit the button marked "close door" or "open door"?

An unofficial sampling shows that the "close door" button is usually all but worn away, while its open-door twin is pristine, though it works if anyone chooses to use it. Clearly, not many do. The close-door button might as well have a happy face on it and squirt water at your eye. The doors will close when they are good and ready. People press away anyway, futilely, believing that insistence gets results. Or maybe they enjoy that sense of power that pressing seems to impart.

Not so long ago the most powerful person in America was referred to as "the man with a finger on the button." With the end of the cold war, that changed. The thought of men and buttons now only stirs up dread when it involves a remote control. And that is easily remedied by hiding the AA batteries and blaming technology.