

Surveys Show Consumers Prefer Air Bag Protection

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Auto Maker's Study Reveals Bags 'Overwhelming Favorite'

A recent market survey conducted for an auto manufacturer has found that air bags were the "overwhelming favorite" — strongly preferred to passive belts — of consumers once they had been given adequate information about such passive restraint systems.

The survey also found that many of the interviewed consumers complained "spontaneously" that they had been previously "kept in the dark" about passive restraints. The survey results suggest that consumers would like more information about passive restraint systems than they are presently getting.

Excerpted information from the survey, carried out for Volvo of America and involving interviews with groups of Volvo owners and non-owners, showed that the interview subjects initially were asked about their knowledge and attitudes concerning passive restraint systems — air bags and passive belts.

Following the interviews, the subjects were shown two 10-minute films, one demonstrating the operation of air bags and the other demonstrating passive belts. (The air bag film was excerpted from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety documentary, "Crashes That Need Not Kill." See *Status Report*, Vol. 11, No. 13, Aug. 17, 1976.) They were interviewed a second time after seeing the films.

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DOT Research Finds Buyers Concerned Over Auto Safety

More Americans will buy new cars equipped with air bags than with automatic seat belts even if air bags cost \$100 more than the belts, according to a nationwide survey released by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT).

And, according to the DOT-funded survey, safety is one of the most important concerns the public has in buying a new car.

The survey found that if air bags cost \$100 more than automatic seat belts — as has been estimated by the DOT — 44 percent of the some 2,000 adults polled said they would prefer to buy cars equipped with air bags, while 41 percent said they would prefer cars with "passive" or automatic belts.

In a progress report on air bags and automatic belt systems also released by the DOT, the agency said the devices already are saving lives, and that several auto makers intend to offer air bags at least a year before a DOT ruling requiring passive restraints takes effect.

The survey, conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., found that the preference for air bags grew as the difference in cost between the restraint systems shrank in hypothetical buying situations. With air bags costing an additional \$350 — a figure considerably higher than the additional \$150 to \$250 estimated by auto

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Auto Maker's Study . . . (Cont'd from page 1)

In the initial interviews the subjects' knowledge and attitudes about passive restraints "varied tremendously," according to the survey report. Although some of those interviewed believed themselves to be "knowledgeable" about passive restraints, there was actually "a noticeable lack of real knowledge on the part of most respondents . . . It should be noted that during the course of most of the sessions, a goodly number of auto consumers spontaneously mentioned being 'kept in the dark' about passive restraints."

AFTER FILMS, VIEWS CHANGE

Once they had seen the air bag and passive belt educational films, however, the interview subjects registered "amazingly similar" reactions in favor of air bags, the survey report said.

"Air bags were the overwhelming favorite" passive restraint system desired by the interview subjects, it said – deemed "much better" than passive belts for a number of reasons, including the following:

- "The protection it provides in the event of an accident was considered far superior," with protection from flying glass and windshield contact being cited by those interviewed.
- "The way air bags work," with interview subjects noting that among other desirable features, the air bag "only comes out when you need it."
- Less probability of malfunction than for passive belts. "Even more importantly, malfunction of the belt bothered respondents from a 'safety' perspective," the report noted.

According to the survey report, "Not only were air bags considered a far better alternative to [passive] seat belts, they also became a highly desirable commodity to at least half the participants . . . There were even those who had been extremely opposed to air bags who, after seeing the two films, felt that 'air bags look like a real good thing to have in your car . . . I think they would really matter in a bad accident.'"

When advised that air bags might be "far more expensive" than passive belts, the survey report added, the interview subjects' response was: "How can you put a price on your life or your family's life? . . . People invest in all kinds of useless extras when they buy a new car . . . This is worth it."

NHTSA Warns Of Ford Transmission Problems

Concern over a possible transmission defect in as many as 9 million Ford Motor Co. cars and light trucks of the 1970 through 1978 model years has prompted a warning to the vehicle owners from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

At the same time, NHTSA Administrator Joan Claybrook said the agency is pushing a formal defect investigation of the problem "on a priority basis." If a determination of a safety defect is made, it could lead to the largest vehicle recall in history. The cause for concern, NHTSA said, has been in reports of 777 accidents, 259 injuries, and 23 fatalities allegedly caused by the transmissions jumping from "Park" into "Reverse" gear.

The NHTSA warning came as a "consumer advisory" to owners of vehicles made by Ford and equipped with the "C6" or "FMX" automatic transmissions. Drivers of cars or trucks with this equipment were warned at stops to turn off the engine, push the gear selector all the way to the "Park" position and test it to make sure it is secure, and set the parking brake. "Vehicles should never be left unattended with their engines running," NHTSA advised, "not even for the brief period it may take to leave the vehicle to close a garage door, make a pickup at a store, or check the mailbox at the end of your driveway."

How To Identify Vehicles That May Have A Problem

Since few vehicle owners know the type of transmission with which their cars are equipped, here is the way NHTSA suggests you can discover if your Ford vehicle is among those having possible transmission problems:

Check the certification label on either the door pillars or door edge at the driver's side. At the bottom of the label are listed several identifying features, including the abbreviation "TRANS." Directly under this is a letter symbol. If a Ford passenger car has one of the transmissions with a possible problem, the letter will be either "X" or "U." In a Ford light truck affected by the investigation the letter will be a "G," and in a police vehicle it will be a "Z."

In general, the vehicles affected by the investigation are 1970-78 models, with either six or eight cylinder engines of 300 cubic inches or larger.

Claybrook explained that the precautions are indicated because, "There is a tendency to slip into reverse gear because of engine vibration or even the closing of a door, if the transmission is not firmly engaged in the Park position."

In addition to issuing the warning, NHTSA solicited reports from any vehicle owners who have experienced the problem of having a car shift into gear unexpectedly. Notice by mail is preferred, with the vehicle owner summarizing details of the incident together with information on the make, model, and year of the vehicle and, where possible, the Vehicle Identification Number. The letter should be addressed to Office of Defects Investigation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 400 Seventh St., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590.

Those unable to report by mail were urged to call the information to the auto safety hotline, 800-424-9393 (Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, 426-0123).

Ford, while denying that there is evidence of a safety problem in the vehicles, has promised an investigation of its own into reported incidents. Company spokesman have attributed problems with the transmissions to the failure of drivers to seat the gear selector properly in the Park position.

Quoted Without Comment

Acts of Congress are revolutionizing the car business: the Clean Air Act, the Energy Policy and Conservation Act, the Motor Vehicle Information and Cost Savings Act, the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act. All their goals indisputably are judged desirable by our society. When the industry, in a versus reflex, set its face and its lobbyists against such legislation, it committed a ghastly blunder. Its public reputation has never recovered.

From "Ford: The Road Ahead"
by Walter Guzzardi, Jr.,
in the Sept. 11, 1978, issue
of Fortune Magazine

DOT Research . . . (Cont'd from page 1)

makers – 35 percent of the respondents said they would prefer air bags, while 50 percent would choose passive belts. With air bags priced \$200 higher, 38 percent of the respondents would choose air bags, and 46 percent would choose passive belts; and with the cost of the systems the same, the respondents would choose air bags over passive belts by a margin of 50 percent to 37 percent.

It “appears that there will be a sizable market for both air bags and automatic seat belts when consumers have a choice of passive restraint systems,” the survey concluded.

Under Transportation Secretary Brock Adams’ passive restraint ruling, auto makers will be required to substantially reduce by automatic means the forces that reach front seat occupants in severe frontal crashes. Manufacturers may meet this performance requirement by using any design they choose – including passive belts or air bags – as long as it meets the crash-force reduction requirement. The requirement takes effect starting with 1982-model full-size cars, 1983-model intermediate and compact cars, and 1984 subcompacts. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 12, No. 12, July 26, 1977.)

SAFETY CONCERN IS HIGH ON THE LIST

The Hart survey found safety to be “among the most important factors” Americans consider in buying a new car. Safety was rated in importance above such factors as insurance rates, interior comfort and style, size, dealer service, exterior appearance, preference for a particular make, resale value, and prestige value. Outweighing safety in importance were the “pocketbook” considerations of a car’s overall cost, gas mileage, and repair record.

These responses suggested that “many consumers would actively seek out cars that they perceive as being safer, and would avoid those that they suspected of being unsafe,” the study noted.

Some 70 percent of the respondents expressed “a great deal” or “quite a bit” of concern that they or a member of their immediate family might be involved in an automobile accident. “Related to the public perception that they may be involved in a car crash is the feeling that despite improvements in automobile safety newer cars provide relatively little protection in collisions,” the survey continued. “Thus, about two out of three people think that cars should be built with as many safety features as possible,” it explained. Only one out of four agrees that cars should have “only those safety features that must be built in the car as standard equipment, allowing the buyer to select other safety features as options.”

MAJORITY CHOOSES ‘BUILT-IN’ SAFETY

The survey also found that a majority of Americans – 58 percent – approve of the DOT ruling requiring passive restraints. However, only a quarter of those interviewed said they use seat belts all or most of the time. These findings indicate that “people prefer built-in safety,” said Joan Claybrook, administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), in a press conference to announce the survey results.

A preference for “built-in safety” also was indicated by survey findings that, by a two-to-one margin, respondents said the government should require passive crash protection in new cars rather than encourage the use of “active” belts – which motorists must fasten themselves. The survey reported that 57 percent “strongly oppose” laws that would require belt use.

The survey also noted that the respondents who said they are infrequent seat belt users preferred federally mandated passive restraints to government efforts to encourage belt use, by a margin of 56 percent to 15 percent. People who said they don’t use belts, it concluded, “appear to be saying that if

they are to be reached by government safety efforts, it will be through technological innovation rather than through education and persuasion in favor of seat belt use.”

In her comments to the press, Claybrook said NHTSA believes that a key reason for the low usage rate of active seat belts is that they are frequently uncomfortable and inconvenient to use. She predicted the agency this fall will issue a comfort and convenience standard for active belts. According to the Hart survey, a significant number of respondents who said they use seat belts find them “hard to use and uncomfortable,” while respondents who said they are infrequent users have many negative comments about the restraints, seeing them as “confining, bothersome, and uncomfortable.”

AIR BAGS EXPECTED AHEAD OF SCHEDULE

In the progress report on passive restraints released with the Hart survey, the DOT said that several auto makers intend to offer air bags at least a year ahead of schedule. Ford plans to offer air bags as an option on at least one 1981 luxury model, and passive belts as an option on some 1980 and 1981 model cars, the report said. Air bags will be optional on 1981-model full-size General Motors cars, it reported, noting that GM already has begun producing passive belts as an option on the Chevette, and plans to offer the belts on “at least two other car lines in the next two years.”

Chrysler intends to offer air bags a year before the passives standard takes effect, and Volvo is “actively” working to develop air bags for production, possibly in advance of the standard, the DOT said. Toyota plans to offer passive belts on some 1980 models, while Volkswagen has offered the belts in the Rabbit since 1975, it added.

The progress report noted that passive restraints already are saving lives. “After nearly 600 million miles of travel of air bag equipped cars, mostly those made by General Motors for 1974 through 1976 models, the fatality rate was 0.85 per 100 million miles, about half the rate observed in full-size cars equipped with conventional belts,” the DOT reported. After more than one billion miles of travel, the DOT noted, the occupants of Volkswagen Rabbits equipped with passive belts had a fatality rate of 0.78 per 100 million miles, compared to a rate of 2.34 for Rabbits equipped with conventional belts.

States Urged To Consider Mandatory Belt Use Laws

Joan Claybrook, head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), has urged governors to consider state adoption of mandatory seat belt laws despite their unpopularity.

“Despite decades of intense efforts by highway safety advocates in the public and private sectors to promote the voluntary use of safety belts by American motorists, belt wearing levels in our country remain at a shockingly low level,” she said in a letter to each governor. Recent surveys have shown that only about 16 percent of the nation’s drivers use safety belts.

“Under future Department of Transportation standards, cars sold in this country will be designed to provide protection to their occupants in crashes automatically, by means of air bags, passive belts, or other systems,” her letter stated. However, those standards are not scheduled to go into effect until the 1980s.

“Meanwhile, thousands of American adults and children are needlessly dying and being crippled in car crashes each year, simply because they have failed to wear their safety belts,” Claybrook said. “Short of passage of state laws to force belt use, the stark fact is that this death and maiming promises to go on unabated since there is little demonstrated likelihood that the other approaches to induce Americans to wear their belts will succeed.”

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Saying that she realized that passage of such legislation would be a "difficult" process, Claybrook asserted that the loss of life "makes renewed consideration imperative."

Claybrook pointed to experience in other countries where seat belt laws are reported to have dramatically increased the usage rate. In testimony concerning belt use obstacles before the Subcommittee on Investigation and Review of the House Public Works Committee earlier this year, witnesses said that a mandatory belt use law in Ontario had resulted in a 75 percent usage rate initially, followed by a decline to about 50 percent. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 8, June 15, 1978.)

(In Sweden, where belt use climbed to more than 80 percent in the year following passage of a belt use law, deaths and injuries didn't decline significantly, researchers said, because those drivers most likely to become involved in crashes, drunk drivers and teenagers, failed to use their belts. See *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 7, May 31, 1978.)

According to NHTSA, belt use late in 1977 and early 1978 dropped to 16 percent from 18.5 percent in 1976. The survey showed that younger drivers, particularly women, were more likely to wear seat belts. Drivers of subcompacts used seat belts 29 percent of the time, compared to 13.6 percent of the drivers of larger luxury cars. The usage rate peaked among drivers of 1974 model year cars equipped with starter interlock systems, declining in newer cars, the survey said. Overall, drivers on the West Coast tended to buckle up more often than their East Coast counterparts, NHTSA reported.

States Fail To Upgrade Crash-Damaged Protective Devices

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has found in a recent survey of state highway maintenance practices that "the general practice throughout the states is to either replace damaged hardware in kind or to upgrade only selected items, such as guardrails damaged beyond repair," despite the availability of federal funds to upgrade equipment to existing safety standards.

The FHWA conducted the survey in response to a recommendation of the National Transportation Safety Board. It found that highway officials were reluctant to upgrade equipment for a variety of reasons, including the apparently mistaken assumption that upgrading of equipment such as guardrails, bridge connections, and sign supports, might constitute an admission that the original equipment was substandard.

In its report, FHWA said that "due to the nature of some State liability laws, various highway departments may be held accountable for accident damages if an appurtenance is not replaced to the standard existing at the time of original construction." That statement was later criticized by another FHWA official, who told *Status Report*, the statement was based not on legal opinion, but on "assumptions" by some state highway engineers.

(In fact, most court decisions indicate that highway repairs should bring equipment up to the state of the art existing at the time of repair. In a 1972 California case, the state was held liable for its failure to upgrade an intersection with a history of crashes and repeated notification of the state highway department of the existing hazard. See *Status Report*, Vol. 7, No. 21, Nov. 13, 1972.)

Additionally, many highway maintenance officials were either unaware of the latest safety standards or had existing inventories of obsolete hardware they wished to deplete, the FHWA survey showed. Others claimed bureaucratic red tape didn't make it worth the effort to apply for federal aid.

In another, yet-to-be-published study, the FHWA has undertaken an exhaustive review of highway safety practices throughout the states. According to an official familiar with the survey – which is to be FHWA’s sequel to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials’ (AASHTO) famous “Yellow Book” (see *Status Report*, Vol. 10, No. 9, April 28, 1975) – investigators found “there is quite a variation” in state maintenance of crash cushions struck in gore areas. One state reportedly has a “policy” of replacing struck cushions within 24 hours while others will wait weeks or even months “until they can let a contract to repair 4 or 5 crash cushions at once.” Such delays may result in needless injuries and deaths if motorists continue to strike the unprotected gore areas.

In a separate notice issued in November 1977 to states, FHWA said that while the federal government will not shoulder the total cost of making highway improvements, it will pay the difference in upgrading equipment to meet current safety standards. Funds are available to:

- Replace crash-damaged signs and light supports with breakaway designs or relocation out of harm’s way.
- Upgrade signing and marking at crash sites.
- Connect replacement guardrails to bridge ends.
- Upgrade damaged culverts to meet the latest safety standards.

In the notice, FHWA said it would help state officials develop “procedures for combining projects and reducing red tape.” Funds for safety-related improvements have been available for years.

Additional information can be obtained by asking for the “Summary Report on State Maintenance Practices in Replacement of Damaged Highway Hardware” and FHWA Notice N 7560.4, “Federal-Aid Participation in Highway Appurtenances,” from the Federal Highway Administration, 400 Seventh St., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590.

FHWA Studies Uniform Grade-Crossing Traffic Controls

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is “considering the development of uniform nationwide criteria for the selection of various types of traffic controls systems to be installed at railroad-highway grade crossings,” the agency said in an advance notice of proposed rulemaking.

According to the agency, there are about 220,000 grade crossings throughout the United States, 50,000 of which are equipped with active warning devices. With approximately 1,000 fatalities resulting from 12,000 train-motor vehicle crashes annually, there is a ratio of one fatality per 12 crashes, compared to a ratio of one fatality per 278 crashes for all other types of highway crashes, FHWA said.

The announcement follows a study by the General Accounting Office (GAO), criticizing FHWA’s failure to set uniform minimum standards for motorist protection at rail crossings. In its report, GAO faulted both the Congress for its failure to base safety funding formulas on safety needs, and FHWA for not requiring states to make cost effectiveness analyses for safety improvements, even though such reports have been required since passage of the 1973 Highway Safety Act. Rail safety funding constitutes over half of the Department of Transportation’s highway-related safety authorizations, but crossing fatalities represent only 2 percent of the highway death toll, according to GAO. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 8, June 15, 1978.)

(Cont’d on page 8)

FHWA asked the public to comment on whether it should develop criteria for selection of highway traffic control systems and on the factors involved in setting the various levels of protection for the public. All comments must be submitted by Oct. 16, 1978, to FHWA, Docket No. 78-13, Room 4205, 400 Seventh St., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590.

GAO Recommends Curbs On Urban Use Of LEG Trucks

The enormous explosive potential of truckloads of liquefied energy gases (LEG) such as liquefied natural gas and liquefied petroleum gas poses a serious threat to public safety when the substances are transported through densely populated areas, a Congressional study has warned.

The study, conducted by the General Accounting Office (GAO), indicated that the devastating explosions of LEG transport trucks in Spain and Mexico in July which killed some 160 persons could well occur in the United States.

To curb the dangers of transporting LEG, the GAO recommended that unless delivery is otherwise impossible, the Department of Transportation (DOT) should prohibit LEG trucks from traveling through densely populated areas, and through areas made especially vulnerable to major LEG spills by features such as subways, sewer systems, and tunnel openings. Other GAO recommendations included requiring more extensive training for LEG truck drivers, additional insulation for liquefied petroleum gas trailer tanks, and added protection for the "relatively vulnerable" front end of LEG trailers.

Hazardous cargo trucks, including those carrying liquid energy gases, are not required to retain their cargoes when they crash.

"The 40 cubic meters of LNG (liquefied natural gas) in one truck, vaporized and mixed with air in flammable proportions, are enough to fill more than 110 miles of 6-foot diameter sewer line, or 15 miles of a 16-foot diameter subway system," the study noted.

DANGER SEEN ON ELEVATED HIGHWAYS

"If an LEG truck fell from an urban elevated highway," the GAO said, "it would probably split open on the street below. LEG and its vapors could then flow down into sewers, subways, and basements. Because of its low boiling point, LEG would quickly vaporize, generating a pressure which would spread the invisible, odorless, explosive gas." Pointing out the possibility of such a spill occurring, the study reported that most of the shipments out of the LNG facility in Everett, Mass., travel through Boston on an elevated highway that passes "within a few blocks of the crowded Government Center area, which is laced with sewer and subway tunnels as well as other subterranean structures."

Increasing the possibility of LEG spills are inadequately trained drivers, and the relatively high center of gravity of LEG truck trailers, which makes the vehicles more susceptible to rollovers, the study said. In addition, it noted that the DOT has no special inspection program for LEG trucks, and that for all U.S. trucking, the department has only 128 inspectors to monitor 3 million commercial vehicles.

Explosions of LEG trucks already have taken their toll in deaths and injuries in the U.S., the study indicated, noting, for example, that a 1975 crash near Eagle Pass, Tex., killed 16 people and injured 45.

In response to initial comments by government agencies on the study, the GAO rejected a suggestion by DOT officials that local jurisdictions be responsible for rerouting traffic away from densely populated areas, saying that local power is too limited. Although acknowledging that LNG trailers are “sturdy,” the GAO, citing the possibly disastrous consequences of a spill, disagreed with a Commerce Department comment that present trailer construction “seems sufficient.” It also disputed a comment by the DOT’s Federal Highway Administration that the cost of insulating liquefied petroleum gas trailer tanks is not justified because of their “good” safety record. “We do not believe the safety record has been that good,” the study said, noting two trailer tank ruptures in which 18 people were killed, and 40 injured.

Congressional Subcommittee Urges Firestone Recall

A Congressional subcommittee, after an investigation and hearings into alleged defects in Firestone 500 steel-belted radial tires, has urged the manufacturer to recall every one of the tires in use.

If no voluntary recall is made, the House Commerce Committee’s Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations also has urged the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to order a mandatory recall and maximum civil penalties against the tire maker. NHTSA already has made an initial finding that a safety defect exists in the tires and is currently studying a final order in the case. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 11, Aug. 3, 1978.)

Attorney Ralph Nader also has criticized NHTSA for its delay in ordering such a recall, claiming in a letter to NHTSA Administrator Joan Claybrook that each week 125,000 of the tires in question are scrapped because they “have either worn out or blown out.” The delay is critical, Nader emphasized, because any NHTSA recall is only allowed to include tires sold in the three years prior to a recall order.

The Congressional subcommittee, headed by Rep. John Moss (D.-Calif.), also recommended that Congress amend the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act to give NHTSA additional investigative powers and to extend the time tire manufacturers are liable for recall from three to five years.

COURT AFFIRMS NHTSA POWERS

NHTSA’s investigative powers under the original act passed their first federal court test recently when a U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., ruled the agency had authority to require compliance with its special orders for submission of information. NHTSA had issued a special order Dec. 20, 1977, directing Firestone to supply consumer complaint letters, warranty adjustment reports, and accident investigation reports from its files. A final response to the order was not received from the tire maker until April 26, 1978, and it did not provide the requested information. NHTSA went to federal court to enforce its order, and last month the court affirmed the agency’s authority.

Firestone had resisted the court action on several grounds, including claims that NHTSA’s statutory authority is limited and that the action should have been filed in the Ohio district rather than in Washington. But the federal court held, “Congress intended that the Secretary of Transportation, and by delegation NHTSA, should have broad investigative power so as to insure highway traffic safety It would be contrary to this intent, and contrary to reason, to circumscribe NHTSA’s enforcement powers in the way Firestone has suggested.”

The Pinto Story: The Press In Low Gear

Consider the British subject browsing through his paper of a wintry Sunday morn. Attracted to a page-one story in the February 9 edition of the London *Sunday Times* headlined "The Arithmetic That Cost £66M," he would have learned that a California jury had awarded one Richard Grimshaw \$128 million in compensatory and punitive damages for burns suffered when the Ford Pinto in which he had been riding burst into flames after a minor accident. Were he a bit uncertain of the meaning of "punitive," he would have been instructed as to its implication of conscious and wilful knowledge on the part of the company in disregarding the safety of the people who bought its product. Reading on, he would have seen a diagram describing the model's susceptibility to gas-tank explosion on rear-end impact. He would have read the testimony of a former company engineer explaining that a simple safety design modification costing less than \$11 a car had been rejected by company managers wary of pricing the Pinto out of the lucrative compact market. And he would have seen a reproduction of a confidential company memo that had convinced the jury to make the record award: calculations estimating the comparative costs between the benefits to society in saving the lives of the 180 people who were likely to be burned to death and preventing 180 more from receiving severe burns (\$49.5 million), and the cost of altering its product to conform to safety standards (\$137 million), as well as its engineers' bottom-line conclusion that the modifications would not be "cost effective." The Pinto, incidentally, has never been sold in Great Britain.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic — where two-and-a-half million Pintos currently are on the road — how fared our British reader's American counterpart: Here the press had seized on the Pinto story with less enthusiasm. Most papers relied on the thirteen-paragraph Associated Press story that had moved out of Santa Ana on February 7, printing severely truncated versions. *The New York Times*, for example, gave the story 275 words on the bottom of page 26, where an attentive reader might have picked up the oblique reference to the fact that the car had failed five crash tests. *The Louisville Times* used 125 words, including a couple about "faulty welding." *The Milwaukee Journal's* 100 words were even more coy: not a single hint of possible defectiveness, let alone corporate culpability. Still, it told readers more than did the Baltimore *Sun*, which all but ignored the story — although the *Sun* did produce, two days later on February 9, a lyrical 28-inch feature on the steadfast reliability of the family Pinto during a recent snowstorm ("Remember Balto and the Serum: This Is About Pinto in the Snow").

There were exceptions. *The Miami Herald's* account was careful to explain the implications of the confusing legalese: that the jury had "agreed with charges by Grimshaw's lawyer that Ford was negligent in designing the cars and that it failed to correct a major fire hazard after it was discovered in company crash tests in 1970"; and, unlike most other accounts, the *Herald's* went on the acknowledge Mark Dowie's article in the September/October 1977 issue of *Mother Jones* magazine, which had documented the Pinto story ("Darts and Laurels," *CJR*, November/December). Jeffrey Perlman's by-lined story in the *Los Angeles Times* was even more explicit, clarifying the charges of "wrongful death" and claims that Ford "had deliberately fitted Pinto cars with poorly designed gas

tanks which ruptured upon light impact," and mentioning the \$10-a-car adjustment that could have been made to alleviate the problem, but wasn't. Neither did the Detroit papers hang back: the *Free Press's* account was clear and complete, with references both to the *Mother Jones* article and Ralph Nader's earlier criticisms of the Pinto design; readers of the *Detroit News* were similarly well served with the complete A.P. story on February 7 and a dramatic follow-up on February 19 headlined "Ford Knew People Would Be Killed — Juror Telling of \$125 Million Award." This last was a reprint of Roy Harris, Jr.'s impressive piece in *The Wall Street Journal* of February 14 headlined "Why the Pinto Jury Felt Ford Deserved \$125 Million Penalty," an in-depth report based on interviews with the jurors who had made the unprecedented award. Harris's article described the oral testimony, company records, test-crash films, and emotional reactions of the jurors, as well as the logic by which they arrived at the \$125 million: since the company had saved \$100 million by not installing safe gas tanks, they reasoned, an award of anything less would not be truly punitive. (On March 30, however, an appellate judge ruled that \$3.8 million was punitive enough.) Other papers picking up the Harris article included *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*.

On the network evening news shows, too, there was little uniformity in handling the story. On CBS, Walter Cronkite delivered a seven-sentence model of conciseness that touched the key points at issue. On ABC, Harry Reasoner and Jim Mitchell gave the story extended play, with interviews with Grimshaw and film clips of a test crash; in effect, its February 7 report was a follow-up to a strong segment dealing with the Pinto problem on its February 2 newscast, in which science reporter Jules Bergman had reported categorically that "Ford engineers knew about the Pinto hazards at least seven years ago. The evidence is in a Ford internal memo, acquired by ABC News. . . . Ford refuses to comment, won't let us film inside a Pinto production plant, and has denied that Pinto is any more dangerous than other cars." On the *NBC Nightly News*, however, it was a different story — or more precisely, none at all.

The newweeklies were also of two minds about it. *Time* backed into it on February 20, using the Pinto case as a peg for a full-page "Law" piece on the alarming trend to "rapidly inflating jury awards" and the "chorus of protests" against them. *Newsweek*, for its part, did even less, skipping it altogether.

How well — or how poorly — our hypothetical American citizen was served in receiving information involving the quintessential American corporation and its quintessential American product, then, appears to have been largely an accident of geography and of viewing and reading habits, combined, of course, with varying amounts of judgment, responsibility, and delicacy on the part of the press. If he lived in Los Angeles, watched Reasoner and Walters, and/or subscribed to *The Wall Street Journal*, chances are that he would have had a pretty good notion of what the Pinto story was all about. But if he happened to live in Baltimore, was a Chancellor-Brinkley fan, and followed *Newsweek* — well, he would have been a lot better off, at least in this particular case, with a newsbundle from Britain.

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UPDATE . . .

NEW RRR STANDARDS: The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has proposed new rulemaking to establish design standards for resurfacing, restoration, and rehabilitation federal-aid highway projects. The proposal replaces an earlier, controversial set of design standards proposed by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials that was withdrawn under fire early this year. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Feb. 7, 1978.) The standards, the FHWA explained, will be intended to provide a "lower limit" for RRR projects and should not be applied automatically "but only when higher values are not possible or practical." An analysis of the new proposal will be published in a subsequent issue of *Status Report*.

Public comments on the proposed standards may be submitted by Oct. 23, 1978, and should be addressed to: FHWA, Docket No. 78-10, Room 4205, 400 Seventh St., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590.

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PINTO FUEL TANKS: After expressing disappointment with early proposals to correct Ford Pinto and Mercury Bobcat fuel tank problems (see *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 11, Aug. 3, 1978), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has agreed to new plans by the auto manufacturer. The fix, which will apply to some 1.5 million 1971-76 Pinto sedans and 1975-76 Bobcat sedans to be recalled, will consist of installation of two plastic shields between the fuel tank and the rear axle, a longer fuel tank filler tube, and an improved sealing cap for the filler tube. These changes proved satisfactory to NHTSA in a 30-mph vehicle-to-vehicle crash test. Ford has announced that repair parts are in production and recall notices soon will be sent to vehicle owners.

To avoid further problems with the affected cars before the necessary changes can be made, the General Services Administration (GSA) has temporarily removed from service the approximately 300 1976-model Pintos in the federal Interagency Motor Pool. The GSA urged other federal agencies to do the same.

On The Inside

- **AN AUTO MAKER'S SURVEY** shows air bags are the "overwhelming favorite" of consumers when they are informed about them. . . . Page 1
- **AIR BAGS ARE PREFERRED** to automatic belts, even when costing more, the DOT finds in a nationwide survey. . . . Page 1
- **FORD TRANSMISSION** problems bring a NHTSA warning and could lead to the largest vehicle recall in history. . . . Page 2
- **A SIMPLE WAY** for a Ford vehicle owner to check whether his car is affected by potential recall. . . Page 3
- **QUOTED WITHOUT COMMENT:** A pertinent observation on the auto industry from a current magazine article. . . . Page 3
- **MANDATORY SEAT BELT LAWS** should be considered despite their unpopularity, Joan Claybrook tells the governors. . . . Page 5
- **HIGHWAY HARDWARE** damaged in crashes is not often upgraded when replaced, the FHWA finds in a survey of state practices. . . . Page 6
- **UNIFORM GRADE-CROSSING CONTROLS** are proposed by FHWA in advance notice of proposed rule-making. . . . Page 7
- **LIQUEFIED ENERGY GASES** pose a threat of explosion and their transportation in urban areas should be curbed, says GAO. . . . Page 8
- **FIRESTONE 500 RECALL** is urged by House subcommittee after hearings show evidence of defect in tires. . . . Page 9
- **REPRINT:** An article on "The Pinto Story: The Press in Low Gear" from the *Columbia Journalism Review*. . . . Page 10
- **UPDATE:** New RRR design standards proposed; NHTSA and Ford Motor Co. agree on necessary Pinto and Bobcat fix. . . . Page 11

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Status Report

Watergate 600 • Washington, D.C. 20037 • 202/333-0770

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