

# Large Vehicles Are the Solution, Not the Problem

By SAM KAZMAN

If you listen to journalists, you'd think sport-utility vehicles were more dangerous than Saddam Hussein. SUVs supposedly deplete the Earth's resources, poison its atmosphere and encourage rude driving. Worst of all, because of their size they allegedly pose a grave collision threat to just about anyone who ventures outdoors. According to a recent New York Times report, the worst safety hazard is yet to come—once these "expensive toys" depreciate and are sold by the "responsible family people" who now drive them, they'll be bought by teenagers who'll handle them even more recklessly.

These threats have been wildly overstated. And the solution proposed by many SUV critics, raising the federal fuel economy standards, would mean expanding a regulatory program that has already caused thousands of traffic deaths.

The federal Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards, enacted in the wake of the mid-1970s oil shocks, require each auto maker's annual output of new cars to meet a set fuel economy level. The current passenger-car CAFE standard is 27.5 miles per gallon; for light trucks, the standard is a more lenient 20.7 mpg.

The easiest way for car makers to meet ever-rising CAFE standards has been through continued car downsizing. As the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration itself noted, "weight reduction is probably the most powerful technique for improving fuel economy. . . . Each 10 percent reduction in weight improves the fuel economy of a new vehicle design by approximately 8 percent." The result was a CAFE-driven downsizing of approximately 500 pounds per car.

Smaller cars, however, are less crash-worthy than similarly equipped large cars in practically every type of accident. According to a 1989 Harvard-Brookings study, CAFE-induced downsizing has increased car occupant fatalities by between

14% and 27%; that translates to between 2,000 and 4,000 extra deaths a year.

You'd think that NHTSA, an agency whose middle name is safety, would have brought this issue to the forefront of public attention. But instead NHTSA has repeatedly claimed that CAFE has no safety effect. In a 1992 court case brought by the Competitive Enterprise Institute and Consumer Alert, a panel of federal appeals judges blasted NHTSA's position as "fudged analysis," "statistical legerdemain" and "bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo."

If CAFE had been a privately produced product, it would long ago have been recalled as defective and its producer, NHTSA, jailed for the coverup. But because CAFE is a product of Washington rather than Detroit, it remains in place; worse yet, it threatens to expand in the face of the SUV "threat."

The overblown nature of that threat is demonstrated by a study issued last month by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Journalists widely reported the study as re-emphasizing the need for action against SUVs, but its findings indicate otherwise. What the institute found was that collisions between cars and SUVs account for only 4% of car occupant fatalities.

Cars are most vulnerable in side impact collisions. According to the institute, in fatal collisions involving cars that are hit on the side by SUVs, the relative risk that the death will be in the car rather than the SUV is an apparently lopsided 27-to-1. But when this relative risk is broken down by car weight categories, it turns out that car-SUV mismatches are frequently outweighed by other common collision disparities. For example, the occupants of a light car struck in the side by a heavy car

face a greater relative risk of death than when a heavy car is side-impacted by an SUV. That is, there is a greater mismatch between light cars and heavy cars than there is between heavy cars and SUVs.

What this means is that upsizing the car fleet may well be the most important step we could take toward improving safety. But upsizing, of course, is what CAFE currently restricts.

The same conclusion emerges from a 1997 NHTSA study, which was similarly characterized as indicting SUVs but which turns out, on closer analysis, to indict CAFE. A NHTSA press release touted the study's finding that a 100-pound decrease in SUV weight would

prevent 40 fatalities per year, most of them in cars colliding with SUVs. But according to the study itself, this conclusion was not statistically significant; there might even be a net loss of life from such downsizing, and on balance the overall effect would be "negligible." More important, those minimal effects paled in comparison to the effects of a 100-pound increase in passenger car weight—a saving of over 300 lives a year. And the effect of this passenger car upsizing was found to be statistically significant, unlike the SUV downsizing.

Upsizing, however, would entail relaxing CAFE rather than tightening it—a move that would be totally alien to this administration and to its environmentalist supporters. The Sierra Club, for example, claims that higher CAFE standards would be "the biggest single step to curbing global warming." In their 1992 campaign book, Bill Clinton and Al Gore recommended raising CAFE to 40 mpg by 2000—a level whose potential safety consequences add more than a little irony to the book's title, "Putting People First."

SUV critics argue, to use Consumer Reports' words, that "most people who buy an SUV don't need one." But what one person doesn't need is largely a matter of another person's opinion. In the early 1800s the Duke of Wellington complained that the new railroads would "only encourage the common people to move about needlessly." Today the elitist view is that the masses still move about needlessly, only now they're doing it with four-wheel drive.

SUV owners have perfectly good reasons for their vehicle choices. Even Consumer Reports praises their "roomy interiors, commanding view of the road, and go-anywhere ability." The fact that NHTSA has trained its sights on SUVs hasn't kept its administrator, Ricardo Martinez, out of one. He puts his family in a Ford Explorer, though he declares that

he bought it for safety, to distinguish himself from "some teenager" trying "to be cool." Too bad his regulatory approach doesn't do much for other people's safety.

In fact, much of the SUVs' recent popularity stems from CAFE itself. CAFE's restrictions took their greatest toll on large cars and station wagons. As economist Paul Godek pointed out in a study published last fall, light trucks were the only real alternative for consumers concerned about safety and seating capacity. In effect, he concludes, most of the weight forced off the passenger car fleet by CAFE has reappeared in the light truck fleet.

So the real problem is CAFE, not SUVs. The next time you hear the term SUV, remember: The "S" might as well stand for scapegoat.

Mr. Kazman is general counsel of the Competitive Enterprise Institute in Washington.

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