

CAR SAFETY WARS ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF TECHNOLOGY, POLITICS, AND DEATH

MICHAEL R. LEMOV

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Lemov's Car Safety Wars is an insider's view of how people have influenced power and policies that make us all safer. Car Safety Wars empowers people to better protect themselves and their loved ones from crash deaths and serious injuries—and to help build a safer America. (Louis V. Lombardo, former research scientist, National Highway Safety Administration, and founder of careforcrashvictims.com)

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Car Safety Wars is a gripping history of the hundred-year struggle to improve the safety of American automobiles and save lives on the highways. Described as the "equivalent of war" by the Supreme Court, the battle involved the automobile industry, unsung and long-forgotten safety heroes, at least six US Presidents, a reluctant Congress, new auto technologies, and, most of all, the mindset of the American public: would they demand and be willing to pay for safer cars? The "Car Safety Wars" were at first won by consumers and safety advocates. The major victory was the enactment in 1966 of a ground breaking federal safety law. The safety act was pushed through Congress over the bitter objections of car manufacturers by a major scandal involving General Motors, its private detectives, Ralph Nader, and a gutty cigar-chomping old politician. The act is a success story for government safety regulation. It has cut highway death and injury rates by over seventy percent in the years since its enactment, saving more than two million lives and billions of taxpayer dollars.

But the car safety wars have never ended. GM has recently been charged with covering up deadly defects resulting in multiple ignition switch shut offs. Toyota has been fined for not reporting fatal unintended acceleration in many models. Honda and other companies have—for years—sold cars incorporating defective air bags. These current events, suggesting a failure of safety regulation, may serve to warn us that safety laws and agencies created with good intentions can be corrupted and strangled over time.

This book suggests ways to avoid this result, but shows that safer cars and highways are a hard road to travel. We are only part of the way home.

- Sales Rank: #2179261 in Books
- Published on: 2015-09-25
- Released on: 2015-09-25
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.01" h x .82" w x 6.08" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 284 pages

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Read the story about how cars became safer and learn why it's important to know that

By John Drabek

If you test drive a new car at a nearby dealer, you are likely captivated by how new and shiny it is, and how it comes loaded with safety features. Cars were just as new and shiny in the 1950's, but little thought was given to auto safety. As a result, many more people were killed and injured in car crashes in those days than are today. If people thought about it all, they probably believed that car crashes were part of the price they had to pay for the fun and convenience of the modern automobile.

The advances in car safety were not driven by the automakers. On the contrary, the automakers reluctantly succumbed to the pressure generated by the few courageous Americans who campaigned for better car safety. In Car Safety Wars: One Hundred Years of Technology, Politics, and Death, author Michael Lemov draws on his first-hand experience with car safety regulation, gained as general counsel of the National Commission on Product Safety, and as chief counsel for the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of the House of Representatives. His work is thoroughly researched and documented, as was his previous book (People's Warrior: John Moss and the Fight for Freedom of Information and Consumer Rights).

Recent events tell us that the job is not yet finished. Much of the damage done by the defective GM ignition switch could have been avoided. The Takata air bag crisis leaves a significant proportion of car owners with an uneasy feeling -- several people have been killed or injured by the airbags they relied on. Understanding how the culture of car safety and the motivations of the participants have evolved over time is crucial to understanding how we can further improve car safety today, since more than 30,000 people still die each year in the US.

Although manufacturing has declined in its relative importance in our economy, car safety is one of its success stories. Cars became much safer with very little increase in manufacturing cost, greatly reducing the economic cost of car crashes and saving many from death or disability. Lemov tells a story of success

through adaptation, a story that is quite relevant today.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A good book that could have been much better. By Robert N. Palmer

I just finished reading the above. It is an excellent review of the legislative and regulatory wars that have evolved and re-evolved around automotive safety. Given I have spent the last 30 years of my practice in the crashworthiness field I found it very interesting and illuminating.

I wanted to mention one thing to which I found distressingly absent from the book. Except for a couple pages noting the work of plaintiffs' trial lawyers (around page 190) and a brief reference to Tab Turner, my good friend out of Arkansas, this work completely overlooked the real push for safety after Joan Claybrook and before the sudden unwanted acceleration issues that arose with Toyota. During that 20 plus year time period it was crashworthiness attorneys who were constantly pushing the envelope for safety, unlocking the doors on the secrets in the automotive industry and constantly urging the car companies (and NHTSA) to manufacture safer vehicles. Whether it is Tab Turner in the Firestone tire/Explorer litigation, Peter Neumann in the CJ5 Jeep rollover cases, Steve Van Gaasbeck in the Takata airbag situation, Larry Baron and the Altima airbag defect that literally was blinding women, Lance Cooper in his Melton case uncovering General Motors's deception with ignition switches cases, Don Slavik and others in the SUA issues with Toyota and so many other plaintiffs attorneys who have labored at great expensive both in time and money to reveal the truth about automotive safety to the American public and to get justice for their clients, those stories should have received much more acknowledgment in this otherwise excellent book.

A whole chapter of this book could have also been devoted to the NHTSA administrators who left government work to take employment immediately with car manufactures or have become experts for the manufactures or for law firm who represent car manufacturers and therefore were in cahoots with the automobile industry to make sure that NHTSA did nothing to improve the safety of our vehicles. That in and of itself is one of the greatest scandals of the NHTSA and its failure to keep us all safe.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

This is a book which is highly recommended for those who want to learn how public policy ...

By Ann Segal

This is a book which is highly recommended for those who want to learn how public policy is formed. It is a well researched and thoughtful analysis of the steps and players who have led to our current level of auto safety. The author was part of this history and has an inside knowledge of events, which he presents in a very readable form.

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