Ralph Nader Can't Slow Down

*The vintage safety gadfly and mortal enemy of Brock Yates is still going strong.*



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Few Americans are more responsible for saving lives in cars than Ralph Nader. His 1965 book, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, led directly to the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act and a slew of mandatory safety standards. He famously put the Chevrolet Corvair in his crosshairs, devoting an entire chapter to the rear-engine compact’s deadly design issues.

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At age 87, Nader—whom *Road & Track* once derided in print as the “national nanny”—writes a syndicated column, hosts a weekly radio show, and runs a museum dedicated to torts (yes, legal torts). We called to ask if he’s still mad at us.

*Road & Track:*Can you believe it’s almost 56 years since Unsafe at Any Speed was published?

*Ralph Nader:*It’s absolutely amazing how fast time goes. And you wonder whether anything like that could happen anymore, that a book could generate that kind of groundswell and legislation in record time. It came out in November 1965, and Lyndon Johnson signed the bill the next September.

*Is it true the book was inspired by your experiences hitchhiking?*

Yeah, when you hitchhike as much as I did, you’d come across crashes—sometimes before the police came—and I couldn’t believe what I saw. Some of them were really so grisly. I must have hitchhiked 150,000 miles. I once was picked up by a truck driver in Delaware who asked what I was doing. I told him I was going to Washington to regulate GM, and his eyes started bulging.

*Were you surprised by the vitriol with which GM attacked you?*

I never dreamed they would take such an interest. They hired a private detective firm to follow me everywhere, trying to get all kinds of dirt. They tried to seduce me. In those days they tried to discredit my testimony by saying that because I wasn’t married, I must have been queer. But the real vitriol came from your profession.*Car and Driver* was the worst. They had this guy, Brock Yates, who had this race across the country where—openly—they would go 80, 90, 100 miles per hour. And the cops would wink at them as they roared through the Arizona desert.

*That would be the Cannonball Run.*

Yes! I would denounce it, and they would denounce me as un-American, communist. I said to Yates, “For heaven’s sake, why don’t you interview me?” I would accuse him of being against progress and being complacent in endorsing cars that were a roomful of knives in crashes. We had a hell of a back-and-forth.

*Since we’re clearing the air, do you have a message for Corvair fans?*

They should be worried about how the Corvair treated people. Just look at [John De Lorean’s account] On a Clear Day You Can See General Motors. There’s a lot of stuff on the Corvair from the executives themselves about the kids killed in Grosse Pointe and all that. You know, 30 years ago, I was invited to speak to the Corvair Society of America. They had a gathering in the Maryland suburbs outside Washington. They had hundreds of Corvairs in the parking lot, all nice and shiny. I walk in and everybody was very cordial, but there was a real silence in the room. So I said, “Look, there’s one thing we agree on: In this room are some of the best drivers in America—because you have to be.” Have you ever been in a Corvair? They’re unbelievably tight and uncomfortable if you’re anything over 5'10". I don’t know how anyone bought that car in terms of comfort. It’s a pretty car, no doubt. You know, we have one at the tort museum.

*Is there a gift shop in the tort museum?*

Yes, a wonderful gift shop! You can buy mugs and T-shirts that have a flaming Ford Pinto on them. The car out front is a very nice, polished, undented ’63 Corvair.

*Do you see any innovation in the auto industry?*

It’s Silicon Valley. It’s Tesla. It’s all the braggadocio about autonomous cars by Google’s subsidiary [Waymo] and the other firms out there making outlandish predictions that, in retrospect, have already been proven absurd. Like Elon Musk saying we’ll have autonomous cars on the road by 2020. That scared everyone. He’s the dynamo now because he keeps shocking them.

*Do you think Musk pushed the Big Three to pursue electric vehicles?*

At first they dismissed him—“What does he know, this South African?” Then he started selling cars that people loved. They said, “He can’t do volume. What’s one factory?” Soon he starts opening up in Europe and China. Then they said, “He’s too deep in debt. He’s gonna sink.” And then hey, he’s produced a profit. What really blew their mind was the stock valuation. Here’s this usurper who had a stock valuation greater than the combined valuation of Toyota, GM, Volkswagen, and Ford. That’s all language Detroit understands.

*New cars are full of safety features, yet last year the U.S. saw a 13-year peak in traffic fatalities. How does that compute for you?*

Of course cars are much safer, spectacularly safer, than in 1964. People somehow under COVID—whether it’s the stress or being cooped up—boy, when they get behind that wheel, they really take off. Look at Tiger Woods!

*What steps still need to be taken?*

First of all, President Biden should stop delaying appointing the head of NHTSA. They need to make all the recent safety advances standard equipment—LDW [lane-departure warning] and BSD [blind-spot detection] and the rest should be on all new cars, trucks, and buses. Vehicles need better nighttime visibility through headlight performance. Pedestrian deaths are going up; bicyclist and motorcyclist deaths are going up. There are things that can make the outside of cars safer on low-speed impacts—regulating sharp edges and hood ornaments. There’s got to be advanced drunk-driving-prevention technology. They know how to do that. And then there’s marijuana. We need more research on how serious it is compared to alcohol.

There’s also a lot of old stuff still on the shelf. How long is NHTSA gonna sit on the final rule for three-point seatbelts on school buses? How about barriers on trucks to block vehicles from sliding under? That’s been around for decades all over Europe. What’s our excuse? Plus, the focus on autonomous cars has taken attention away from modern mass-transit technology and public investment.

*Have you ever owned a car?*

A ’49 Studebaker was the last car I owned. That was the car that if you looked at it, you couldn’t tell the front from the rear. I don’t have a car. You have to take care of them, figure out where to park, hassle with the insurance gouging, look out for recalls. I use public transportation or walk when I can. Cars are a nuisance.

*I’m not sure our readers would agree with you. What would you say to auto enthusiasts who hold a grudge against you?*

Tighten your seatbelts. I see all these probable Trump voters getting into their trucks, going wherever, and the first thing they do is what was considered impossible to achieve: They put on their seatbelt. And it isn’t just because it’s the law. It’s because they don’t want the “freedom” to go through the windshield.

*You have a reputation for being a sober-minded ascetic. Do you have any guilty pleasures? Do you secretly love Fast & Furious movies?*

I do like organic ice cream. But no, I don’t watch many movies because there’s so much to do that occupies almost all my waking time. In fact, I don’t even look at TV anymore. I listen to NPR and read the newspapers, the Post and the Times. I’m completely a print person. I don’t have a computer; I use an Underwood typewriter. I don’t have email or the Internet because I want to get work done and not deal with all the crap.

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