



## Unsafe at Any Speed

*Ralph Nader*

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For decades, Ralph Nader (b. 2/27/34) has challenged corporations, government agencies & institutions to be more accountable to the public. In 1965, "Unsafe at Any Speed" changed the face of the automobile industry & made him a household name. As a result of his efforts, cars have more safety features. His lobbying & writing on the food industry insured that the food we buy is required to pass strict guidelines before reaching the consumer. One of his greatest achievements was the 1974 amendment to the Freedom of Information Act that gave increased public access to government documents. This brought freedom of press to a new level, resulting in increased access for journalists. He's cofounded numerous public interest groups including Public Citizen, Critical Mass, Commercial Alert & the Center for Study of Responsive Law. In 2000 he mounted a 2nd bid for president as a candidate for the Green Party, & today continues to be a relentless force for grassroots activism & democratic change in the USA.

## Unsafe at Any Speed Details

Date : Published January 1st 1991 by Knightsbridge Pub. Co. (first published 1965)

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Author : Ralph Nader

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## From Reader Review Unsafe at Any Speed for online ebook

### Cherie Jane Nef says

Fascinating reading about the auto industry.

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### Neil Crossan says

Auto executives are pricks.

Nader refers to cost reduction as a “bitch goddess”. This goddess demanded the sacrifice of leaving available safety features out of cars to increase profits. Padded dashboard boards ... nope, recessed interior knobs and edges ... nope, 3 point seat belts ... nope, anchored seat belts ... nope. You get halfway through this book and you wonder how did these auto executives live with themselves and why the public didn’t throw them into a cold dark sea. These guys were pricks. And it turns out they still kind of are:

<http://www.npr.org/2014/03/31/2973122...>

Even in the mid 1960’s air bags were possible and they kept them from us for decades because of cost. It’s bullshit. One auto executive’s safety plan was to teach his children the “Hands” defense. When he was driving he would yell, “Hands!” and the children would brace their arms in front of themselves to protect themselves from injury. That was a fucking auto executive’s idea. Did I call them pricks yet? Less chrome on the windshield wiper arms to prevent blinding the driver ... nope, more coverage for the windshield wiper blades to improve visibility... nope, impact absorbing bumpers ... nope, standardize the gear order ... screw you driver!

And when they got called out they had a 2 point plan, 1-Blame the driver & 2-Blame the road. Couldn’t be the car right? And then keep all regulations at the state level because they are easier to control than at the Federal level. These guys still aren’t to be trusted. The only time they make cars safer is when we force them. A child under 5 dies every week in the US in auto back up accident. It’s nuts. It took the government to put in a required safety device.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/c...>

Roof strengths still are not as safe as they should be.

<http://consumerreports.org/cro/2012/0...>

(Last section of the article)

I’ve seen articles pointing out the government tests saying the Corvair was as safe as other cars on the road at the time. But I think the question was, “Is the Corvair as safe as it could be?” And that answer was definitely no. Even GM changed the rear axle in 1964. The Corvair was an example of the failure of the industry to make safer cars. Just because other cars were not vilified doesn’t mean THE Corvair punishment was any less just. Instead of saying, “The Corvair is as safe as these other cars,” What the government report should have said is “All these cars suck” because that would have served the public better.

This book is interesting to read as both a historical account and to see how little has changed with auto

executives, especially the first couple of chapters. There are a few occasions where Nader could have been a cleaner writer but that can be forgiven because this book helped save tens of thousands of lives, not only on the roads but in the consumer movement across the country.

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### **Dale says**

If we can try to separate political opinions and differences since the book's publication and look at this book for what it actually was, and is, it's an amazing and brave expose worthy of respect. It tackles the auto industry, advertising, consumer rights, and safety to bring about a point regarding equality: it's unacceptable that we're all equal but some are less equal than others. Those in big business who hide secrets like these, defaulting car parts that are complicated and that can arbitrarily kill you, deserve a special circle of hell. I'm a FULL believer in, and supporter of, capitalism and caveat emptor, but this book had to be written and it changed our current self-concept of what rights we have as consumers, what's misleading and unacceptable in advertising, and that humans deserve higher standards from their vendors. The multitude of laws since then, from JFK's "Consumer Bill of Rights," to IP issues, to false advertising, to limitations of sugar cereal and toys during Saturday morning cartoons all attest to the truth Nader presents us with in this book.

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### **Amy says**

I really liked this book. Highly recommend if you like non-fiction or if you're a fan of Ralph Nader. Was loaned to me by my History of American Technology professor for a research paper on the air bag. Great primary source showing attitudes about automobiles in 1960's America.

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### **KennyO says**

Unless you are conversant with the way life was and the way cars were built in the 1960s you'll probably find little in here to interest you. Nader was as extreme in his direction as the Kings of Detroit were in theirs. Much to our benefit, Nader (a real piece of work) got the ball rolling in the interest of safety. That he went too far in some ways is a given, just as the Detroit execs went too far in theirs. I am certain that Nader wasn't being altruistic in this work. He sometimes worked tirelessly to rid the country of a scourge that no longer existed. e.g. The infamous campaign he led against the Chevrolet Corvair. By the time he got people all worked up about it the Corvair's suspension and handling problem had been corrected by GM engineers but sales fell off as he persisted in railing against the car.

In short: it's dated and unlikely to be worth much of your time today.

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### **Max Mindock says**

Good book, learned a lot, but it was pretty dense. Not a quick easy read, but a good one.

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## **Skip says**

Car manufacturers put out unsafe cars and then they wave the American flag. Where is the patriotism there? And, of course, Nader was vilified for his book. Sure, understandable coming from the car manufacturer, not so understandable coming from people who stood to die in those cars.

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## **Arvin Pamplona says**

Everyone is wearing seatbelts

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## **Sam Weaver says**

Ralph Nader's 1965 *Unsafe at Any Speed* depicts the American Interstate Highway System as a dystopian death-trap, a smog-filled wasteland littered with the burned-out bodies of overturned Corvairs found on every corner, the pavement permanently stained red from the splatter of drivers becoming impaled on their own steering columns. While Nader makes a compelling case that serious design flaws pervaded products coming from the big three American automobile manufacturers during the second half of the 20th century, his narrative seems to lean heavily on anecdotal evidence and some scant statistically validated studies by Cornell—potentially due to the fact that those same automakers obstructed efforts to undertake such analysis. In the current era, where safety innovations such as seatbelts, anti-lock braking systems, and blind-spot alerts come standard in most modern cars, it's difficult to comprehend whether conditions were truly as horrific as Nader claims. Additionally, the events leading up to and subsequently following the then 31-year old attorney's bold and bombastic little book help to inform modern readers about Nader's motivations and lasting legacy as a consumer advocate.

American roads during the late 1950s and early 1960s were, indeed, much more dangerous than they are today, according to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). In 1965, the year the book was published, traffic fatalities reached a whopping rate of 24 per 100,000 in the population; 2013, by contrast, saw roughly 10 fatalities per 100,000. Not only are the roads demonstrably safer today, but the federal agency responsible for collecting those data came into being merely five months after Nader testified on the senate floor during 1966 safety hearings led by Abe Ribicoff.

At those hearings, Nader deftly served up shocking descriptions of industry negligence with a side of genuine pathos. When asked about his motivations by Senator Robert Kennedy, Nader responded, "Because I happen to have a scale of priorities that leads me to engage in the prevention of cruelty to humans," according a 2015 piece in *The Nation* titled 'How Ralph Nader Changed America,' by Mark Green. In that essay, Green extols Nader's genuine and deep-seated commitment to protecting American consumers, which led the attorney to parlay his rising star-status after the highly-publicized hearings into forming a national advocacy group called Nader's Raiders (Green, 2015).

Passionate testimony doesn't pay bills, however, which is why the funding source for the nascent Nader's Raiders deserves special mention. Before the publication of *Unsafe at Any Speed*, executives at General Motors attempted to dig up dirt on Nader in an attempt to discredit him. When the investigations didn't turn

up anything sufficiently scandalous, hired detectives tapped Nader's phones and even solicited prostitutes to try and trick the crusader into getting caught in a compromising position, according to an essay in Legal Affairs. After the incidents, Nader successfully sued for invasion of privacy, netting \$290,000 in an out-of-court settlement (Longhine, 2005). Publicity from the lawsuit likely helped his cause tremendously, providing the public with an easy-to-digest narrative starring a handsome young heroic attorney facing off against unsavory, money-motivated CEOs.

Seed money from the lawsuit allowed Nader to establish the Center for the Study of Responsive Law. And Nader's Raiders didn't stop with the Automobile industry after 1966. Multiple major regulations and federal agencies that people take for granted today such as the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Consumer Product Safety Administration, and even the access to government through the Freedom of Information Act of 1974 all arose out of the attorney's efforts according to biographical information from Nader's website (The Essential Nader, n.d.).

Beyond motivating legislative action by politicians, and ruffling feathers among auto-industry titans, *Unsafe at Any Speed* also attracted national attention, climbing best seller lists alongside Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* during 1966, according to a 2015 New York Times retrospective piece titled "50 Years Ago, 'Unsafe at Any Speed' Shook the Auto World." Clearly the book did better than expected, given that Nader's initial pitches to publishers were met with dismissive rejections, claiming that the story would only be interesting for insurance agents (Jensen, 2015). Even after completing the manuscript, the book nearly never saw the light of day because Nader left the first typewritten draft in a taxicab, according to several sources, including a 2016 snippet in *Automotive News*. Despite these inauspicious beginnings, the book now sits on a pedestal within the collective consciousness as a consumer-protection classic; *TIME* magazine ranked the manuscript as #21 on its 2011 list of 100 best non-fiction books.

Nader remains a public figure and passionate advocate, though most millennials associate his name primarily with the disastrous 2000 presidential election, rather than his historic advocacy efforts. Shortly after the highly-public 1966 hearings, Corvair sales did see a steep decline and Lyndon Johnson did create the NHTSA, however, the automobile industry dragged its feet for decades before implementing some of Nader's other recommended safety measures, like airbags, as described in a piece for the *New York Times* (Tullis, 2013). Industry executives apparently issued delayed *mea culpas* in their autobiographies. Former General Motors executive John DeLorean admitted the veracity of Nader's critiques in his 1979 book *On a Clear Day You Can See General Motors*; Lee Iacocca, the former head of Ford and Chrysler, called the Corvair terrible in his memoir, according to the Wikipedia entries about those books.

Despite historical vindication, Nader seems skeptical that similar social change could be brought about by one explosive book today. Writing on his blog in September, 2016, Nader decried the fact that "corporate media gives us celebrity stories, sports, natural and man-made violent disasters, political horseraces and just plain fluff." (Nader, 2016). He laments that getting such legislation passed would be "very doubtful, without a brand new Congress," and decries the sense of apathy among modern Americans, saying, "There is less perceived rumble from the people than in the nineteen sixties" (Nader, 2016).

*Unsafe at Any Speed* is far from perfect, and, without historical context, the prose is occasionally enough to send skeptical eyebrows arching sky-high. However, dramatic decreases in highway fatalities after the government started paying closer attention to the automobile cannot be denied. The fact that the book inspired automobile industry executives to do some deeply stupid things in an effort to discredit Nader, as well as the now-nearly-unheard-of speed with which congress enacted legislation in response to Nader's accusations, both testify to the text's motivational power.

America still may be a country with “far more solutions than it applies and far more problems than it deserves,” (Nader, 2002), and muckraking paperback manuscripts might not be the medium for inciting social change in the 21st century. But *Unsafe at Any Speed* still resonates as a little book that set off big changes.

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### **Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership says**

One of Cambridge Sustainability's Top 50 Books for Sustainability, as voted for by our alumni network of over 3,000 senior leaders from around the world. To find out more, [click here](#).

*Unsafe at Any Speed*, written in a political, accusative style which reflects Nader's legal background, is probably most widely known for its criticism of the safety flaws in General Motors' Chevrolet Corvair. However, Nader also attacked contemporary auto design more generally, citing a wide range of problems including brightly finished dashboards, which reflected light into the drivers's eyes, poor workmanship, the failure of companies to honour warranties and the lack of standardised shift patterns on automatic cars resulting in drivers accidentally reversing into pedestrians.

All of these problems, according to Nader, were well known in the industry, but little was done to correct them... Although the book focuses on a single industry, its real significance is as one of the catalysts of the social responsibility and civil society movement. It was the first great battle between a large multinational - General Motors, which epitomised corporate America - and an activist representing the public interest. His flagging of the automobile's impact on air pollution also made him a pioneer in the environmental movement and a prophet of the climate change challenges currently facing the auto industry.

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### **Rachel says**

I didn't read all of this book because it is really out of date; once an influential exposé of the auto industry, now a sort of historical artifact reading. It is really incredible what Nader accomplished with this book - even more incredible that the industry cared so little about the consumer safety. Just more evidence that government regulation is necessary and desirable, or else it's the consumer that loses.

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### **Andrea says**

Interesting look at what made cars actually become a lot safer.

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### **Paul Marvin says**

*Unsafe At Any Speed* is an incredibly informative piece, illustrating the shocking negligence of automakers regarding the safety of the drivers of their vehicles. Despite being written 50 years ago, it is still astounding to see the information that Nader made public. On top of this, being that a long time has passed since its writing, it is fascinating to see how automobiles have changed their safety measures in the time after Nader wrote this text. For example, in Chapter 6, Nader writes of how excessive decoration (hood ornaments,

elaborate bumper designs, etc.) greatly reduces the safety of pedestrians upon impact. Now, vehicle styling is rather strictly outlined by pedestrian impact standards. This is one of many changes made since the writing of this text, where their dangers were exposed.

At the same time, the argument of the dangers of the Chevrolet Corvair is so unreasonably one-sided, that it is almost infuriating to read. The Corvair was the first mass-produced, rear-engined American car, and its handling characteristics were deemed unsafe by Nader. The truth is, the different (yet not more dangerous) characteristics of the car's handling made it easy to single out and convince the public that it was designed in an unsafe manner. Although this aspect of this text was definitely the most memorable over time, the rest of Nader's writings hold substantial truth, and are issues that needed to be brought to the attention of the public in order to be corrected. Because of this, the book is a great compilation of examples of flaws in the automotive industry, and is certainly worth reading.

The style of Nader's writing works well for the subject of his text. His writing is very straightforward and simple, to ensure that the reader fully understands his point. On top of this, Nader uses a plethora of quotes and direct examples to prove his points. Without these, his information and argument would be far less impactful. Quotes from both sides are usually given, as well as examples that prove the negligence of automakers, and thus, his argument. This piece is a must read for any automobile enthusiast like myself, and would be nearly as enjoyable for anybody with an interest in nonfiction.

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### **Collette McDonough says**

You really only need to read the introduction, chapter 1 and the last chapter.

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### **Caitlin says**

Unsafe At Any Speed: The Designed-in Dangers of the American Automobile by Ralph Nader (1965)

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