

## FLIP-FLOPPING ON SMALL CAR SAFETY

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When advocates of higher CAFE standards are asked about the safety issue, one of their first responses is invariably along the following lines: "CAFE can't be unsafe; after all, it's endorsed by Ralph Nader, Joan Claybrook, and Clarence Ditlow." (Ditlow heads the Center for Auto Safety.) But as the quotes below demonstrate, these individuals all once recognized the fact that, other things being equal, larger cars are more crashworthy than smaller cars. In fact, in the past they repeatedly warned about the inherent dangers of small cars.

### **Ralph Nader on size versus safety:**

In a 1989 interview, Mr. Nader had the following exchange:

"Q: If you were to buy a car today, what would it be?"

Nader: "One with an airbag."

Q: "What size?"

Nader: "Well, larger cars are safer--there is more bulk to protect the occupant. But they are less fuel efficient ...."

Q: "Which cars are least safe?"

Nader: "The tiny ones such as the Corvette, Yugo, Hyundai."

Source: "Be Safer in the 90's: New Warnings from Ralph Nader", *Woman's Day*, Oct. 24, 1989, p.32

In a 1972 book, he argued that the low weight of the Volkswagen Beetle was a clear indicator of its poor crashworthiness:

"The total weight of the Beetle's four replacement parts is the lowest in this study, a hint of the VW's abysmal crush characteristics. What may be an economy in a minor collision may lead to a staggering loss in a more serious crash."

Source: from Ralph Nader's introduction to *Small--On Safety: The Designed-In Dangers of the Volkswagen* (Center for Auto Safety, 1972) at p. xiv.

### **The Center for Auto Safety on size versus safety:**

In 1972 the Center for Auto Safety (CAS) published a book entitled *Small--On Safety: The Designed-In Dangers of the Volkswagen*. Clarence Ditlow was one of its authors. As the excerpts below demonstrate, a major theme of book is that small cars are inherently less safe than larger ones. I brought this up during my testimony before the National Academy of Sciences CAFE panel in February, 2001. When Ditlow testified after me, he claimed that CAS didn't even exist in 1972. But here's the book's cover and title page:

Ralph Nader's  
Study Group Report  
on the Volkswagen  
by the Center for Auto Safety  
Introduction by Ralph Nader

# SMALL- ON SAFETY

The designed-in dangers  
of the Volkswagen



*The Center for Auto Safety*  
Project Editors: Lowell Dodge, Ralf Hotchkiss,  
Carl Nash, Stephen Oesch, and Bernard O'Meara

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# ***Small- On Safety***

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*The Designed-in Dangers  
of the Volkswagen*

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Grossman Publishers

New York

1972

p. 1: "Many people had long suspected that small cars are less safe in a crash than large cars; their fears were confirmed in late 1964 when Cornell Aeronautical Laboratory's Automobile Crash Injury Research Project released its study of crash injury as a function of car size. Five years later, the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles found that for crashes occurring in that state, the likelihood of serious or fatal injury goes up as the weight of the car decreases."

p. 5: "Because of the Beetle's small size, there is little space between the occupant and the windshield--a factor in the high proportion of windshield injuries that is still a serious problem even if present lap and shoulder belts are used...."

"The size and configuration of the VW contribute significantly to crash injuries. In shorter cars, the gas tank is necessarily closer to the occupant than in larger cars. The propensity of the VW to roll over results in part from its configuration. The Beetle's center of gravity is much higher in relation to the car's track-width than almost every American car's; the result is an unstable vehicle.

"Yet another hazardous result of the Beetle's small size is the lack of effective collapse distance, which is necessary to absorb some of the forces generated by a crash."

p. 12: "Do younger drivers have worse records, on their involvement in serious crashes, because they drive smaller cars, or do smaller cars have a worse record because their drivers are on average younger? There is indication in the data that smaller cars are more to blame."

p. 13: "Small size is supposed to have one compensating advantage: according to a prevailing myth, cars like the Beetle are less likely to become involved in accidents, because they are more maneuverable than large cars. This myth is not supported by the facts."

p. 16: "[T]he control problem of small cars" due to winds and loss of grip on the road.

p. 87: "Small size and light weight impose inherent limitations on the degree of safety that can be built into a vehicle. All known studies relating car size to crash injury conclude that occupants of smaller cars run a higher risk of serious or fatal injury than occupants of larger cars."

The book even points out that the VW's low engine size and power could affect its safety:

p. 73: "Lack of power affects passing ability, uphill performance, and safety in merging onto turnpikes."

#### **Joan Claybrook on size versus safety:**

Ms. Claybrook currently claims that small size does not limit safety. But when she headed the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) in 1977-81 and needed a rationale for issuing more safety standards, guess what she picked? The growing shift toward small cars!

"The growing shift to smaller cars will increase the number of deaths and injuries on U.S. highways, complicating a public health problem that has already reached epidemic proportions."

As NHTSA explained in one study issued under Claybrook:

"Small cars are less safe than large cars in collisions between these vehicles. Safety standards have saved more than 64,000 lives since 1968, but these gains are being outweighed by the shift to smaller cars."

Source: *Small Car Safety In The 1980's* (NHTSA, 1980), p. 6.

When Ms. Claybrook testified on CAFE before Congress during that time, one senator stated: "My commonsense tells me that there is some conflict between the role of auto safety and fuel economy."

Ms. Claybrook's response: "There are going to be tradeoffs."

The senator went on to say, "I don't have any question in my mind that a big gas-guzzling Cadillac is safer on the highway than a little Volkswagen."

Ms. Claybrook's response: "There is no question about that."

Source: *Hearings on Auto Fuel Economy*, Sen. Commerce Comm., 95th Cong., 1st Sess. (July 14, 1977), p. 90-91.