

## IN PURSUIT OF TOTAL SAFETY

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Earlier this year on a trip abroad, we picked up a new, 1972 rental Fiat at the Rome airport and, for the next four weeks, drove it more than 4500 miles on super-highways, back roads and even donkey paths. In spite of a nauseating, orange-mustard color and a large windshield that leaked steadily streams of cold water onto our feet in the lightest drizzle, it handled beautifully, consumed a minimal amount of fuel and performed flawlessly. But its greatest attractions were an old-fashioned, low-back front seat and not a sign of safety belts.

By contrast, the small rental car we drove for a week through New England recently combined a claustrophobic interior, multiple buzzer systems and enough safety harness to immobilize a charging rhinoceros. The high-backed front seats made it impossible to see in any direction but straight ahead without dislocating a neck vertebra. Buzzers sounded continuously—when the ignition turned on, when the doors opened, when the emergency brake wasn't released and when any seat belt remained unfastened. To add to the irritation, one belt was defective and couldn't be locked, so that, while the motor ran, it shrieked constantly.

Columnist Joseph Alsop, who also reacts strongly to this “progressive, insidious subjection of the individual,” feels that compulsory safety devices are indignities that no one should put up with. He has no love for “lunatic reformers” and complains that Naderism has “gotten out of hand.” We agree with him.

Somewhere along the line, in response to calamity forecasters, do-gooders, sociologic tinkerers and eternal busybodies, the idea that Western man is a complete idiot who must be protected from all actual and remotely possible dangers by nursemaid government decrees has obsessed politicians and large segments of the communications media. The resultant growing hypochondria is such that nearly all phases of activity, enterprise and industry now walk timorously in constant fear not only of producing human damage but also in fear of government reprisal and disastrous lawsuit.

This pursuit of total safety, particularly in the case of automobile, combustion-engine pollution and accident prevention, is a prime example of distorted thinking on the part of statistically minded reformers. One recent study conducted in Pennsylvania showed that the accident and injury rate for cars equipped with all the new, mandatory safety devices differed not at all from older cars with none. But in spite of this and other equivocating studies, more and more new safety features will be required.

If we must, or are willing to submit to government regulation in this area, it would make just as much sense for the government to require that all pedestrians don helmets, plastic face shields and padded, protective clothing before crossing any busy intersection. And of course, if government were really serious about protecting us from automobile danger, it could decree that no car be manufactured with more than four cylinders and a

100-horsepower engine, and that nothing larger than a Volkswagen be allowed on the roads. This would immediately drastically reduce the number of serious accidents, help the parking space problem, relieve the congestion in city streets and automatically eliminate more than half of the air pollution due to combustion engines.

However, since none of these suggestions is likely to be put into effect, the best solution for the time being would be to forget all about mandatory safety features and, as he did on the cigarette pack, let the Surgeon General stamp each windshield with his sign of warning that “Automobile Driving Is Dangerous to Your Health”—and let it go at that.

Meanwhile, we’ll take our chances, along with Mr. Alsop, who prefers to choose for himself whether to be stifled by an airbag or go taking the customary risks of the highway. In his words: “Free choice, down with Ralph Nader and to hell with computers should be the motto these days.”

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