

For More Information or to arrange interviews with Ralph Nader

Contact: Hunter Jones or Todd Main

202-387-8034

info@csrl.org

**The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Acts – Fiftieth Anniversary (1966-2016)
Nader Holds Four-Day Conference to Commemorate Fiftieth Anniversary Year of
the Publication of *Unsafe at Any Speed***

Today, September 9, 2016, marks the 50th anniversary of President Lyndon Johnson's signing of the National Highway Traffic Safety Act, a result of Ralph Nader's landmark book *Unsafe at Any Speed*, which was published the previous year. The book opened with the faulty rear suspension system of the General Motors Corvair, This defect could cause the Corvair to skid violently and roll over. The corporate negligence that had produced the various Corvair defects, Nader said, was "one of the greatest acts of industrial irresponsibility." More broadly, *Unsafe at Any Speed* documented how Detroit habitually subordinated safety to style and marketing concerns. The main cause of automobile occupant injuries, Nader demonstrated, was not the "nut behind the wheel" so often blamed by the auto industry, but the inherent engineering and design deficiencies of motor vehicles that were woefully unsafe, especially in terms of "crashworthiness"—no seat belts, etc.

At the signing, President Johnson said, "I am proud of the 89th Congress, which took my proposals and brought forth these laws. And I'm proud at this moment to sign these bills—which promise, in the years to come, to cure the highway disease, to end the years of horror and give us hope."

The publication of *Unsafe at Any Speed* led to GM's contemptible investigation by private detectives and attempts to smear Nader, GM's subsequent public apology at a Senate hearing, and ultimately the 1966 auto and highway safety laws that have saved countless lives and profoundly accelerated the pace of auto safety innovation.

On March 22, 1966 at a Senate hearing chaired by Senator Ribicoff, James M. Roche, the President of GM, apologized to Nader saying:

As president of General Motors, I hold myself fully responsible for any action authorized or initiated by any officer of the corporation which may have had any bearing on the incidents related to our investigation of Mr. Nader... While there can be no disagreement over General Motors' legal right to ascertain necessary facts preparatory to litigation... I am not here to excuse, condone, or justify in any way our investigating Mr. Nader. To the extent that General Motors bears responsibility, I want to apologize here and now to the members of this subcommittee and Mr. Nader. I sincerely hope that these apologies will be accepted. Certainly I bear Nader no ill will.

This episode catapulted auto safety into the public spotlight, leading to a series of landmark laws that have prevented millions of motor vehicle-related deaths and injuries. In particular, the publication of *Unsafe at Any Speed* put forces in motion that brought about the passage of the law that created the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) in order to assert

federal leadership in auto and highway safety. The agency was empowered to set minimum, uniform safety performance and eventually fuel efficiency standards for all motor vehicles, and to require automakers to notify owners and recall cars containing safety-related defects. The episode also cemented Nader in the public mind as a fierce, incorruptible advocate and watchdog, a reputation that launched one of the most singular and enduring roles in American politics. Nader has used his considerable talents as an organizer, activist, legal analyst, and author to rally public opinion, start many citizen initiatives, and push through hundreds of reforms in business, government, and various professions.

In November of 1966, Ralph Nader's lawyer, Stuart Speiser, filed suit against GM for its harassment, invasion of privacy, attempted intimidation, and other nefarious actions. In 1970, GM settled with Nader, agreeing to pay him \$425,000, which he used to found several public interest organizations. *Newsweek* remarked that this settlement will in effect serve as “General Motors’ contribution to the consumer movement. They are going to be financing their own ombudsman.”

This prediction proved to be true; Nader went on to found a wide variety of organizations, all aimed at advancing corporate and government accountability. Nader-inspired groups include Public Citizen, the Center for Auto Safety, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, the Clean Water Action Project, the Pension Rights Center, the Princeton Alumni Corps, and the Applesseed Foundation—a nonprofit network of 17 public interest justice centers.

In addition, Nader conceived and helped establish the state-based PIRGs—Public Interest Research Groups—which are consumer organizations that function on college campuses and in communities in 23 states. The PIRGs have published hundreds of ground-breaking reports and guides, lobbied for laws in their state legislatures, and called the media's attention to consumer, environmental, and energy problems. Many other non-profit advocacy groups followed in the wake of these Nader-inspired organizations.

Nader also played a pivotal role in advancing and improving several major federal consumer protection laws such as the motor vehicle safety laws, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Pure Food and Drug Act, the Clean Air Act, and the landmark Freedom of Information Act, and he worked tirelessly to launch federal regulatory agencies such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC).

An author, lecturer, attorney, and political activist, Nader's life-long work and advocacy has led to safer cars, healthier food, safer drugs, cleaner air and drinking water, and safer work environments. In 2006 he was cited by *The Atlantic* as one of the one hundred most influential figures in American history, *TIME* Magazine has called him the “U.S.’s toughest customer,” the *New York Times* has said of him that “[w]hat sets Nader apart is that he has moved beyond social criticism to effective political action,” and in 1974, a survey conducted by *U.S. News and World Report* rated him as the fourth most influential person in the United States.

In September of 2015, Nader received extensive media coverage for his newest project: the American Museum of Tort Law in Winsted, Connecticut—the first law museum in America.

Nader continues to work relentlessly to advance meaningful civic institutions and citizen participation as an antidote to corporate and government unaccountability. In light of recent revelations about Volkswagen's deceptive skirting of emissions tests, Nader's work is again proving its centrality in consumer advocacy. Not only did the publication of *Unsafe at Any Speed* spur the creation of many necessary organizations, it also provided a fundamental framework for protecting citizens from corporate malfeasance.

As we continue to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary year of the publication of *Unsafe at Any Speed*, we should reflect, on this day, on the victories of past struggles by a small number of pioneers reflecting public opinion, which remind us again and again how it is easier than you think to break through power.

As part of these celebrations, later this month, from September 26th to the 29th, the Center for Study of Responsive Law will be hosting an *unprecedented civic mobilization* in Washington, DC, in which leading activists, scholars, union leaders and civil justice lawyers will present the challenges, and strategize towards attaining future successes in creating a more just society. For more information on this four-day event, please visit breakingthroughpower.org, where you can find a detailed agenda, a list of speakers, and information on obtaining tickets and scholarships.

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