



Car Safety Wars: One Hundred Years of Technology, Politics, and Death

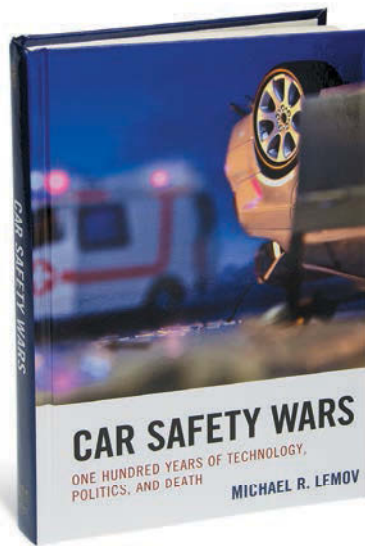
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The Auto Safety War Rages On

Car Safety Wars is a well-researched and thoroughly documented story of an epic 100-year war to force an unwilling auto industry to incorporate life-saving equipment into its cars and trucks.

Michael Lemov, an attorney and former general counsel to the National Commission on Product Safety, begins *Car Safety Wars* by introducing Marina Keegan, who was killed in a rollover accident just five days after graduating from Yale University in 2012. Keegan is a recent casualty of the 30-year battle between an automotive industry relentless in its quest for profits and consumer safety advocates seeking stronger automotive roof structures and enhanced rollover protection. The Keegan tragedy sets the stage for the larger story of the “car safety war” that continues today, as evidenced by reports of consumer deaths and injuries caused by Takata Corp.’s exploding air bags.

Car Safety Wars’ introductory chapters provide a historical perspective of the dark side of America’s car fascination. The first automobile fatality occurred in 1898, and over the next six



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Michael R. Lemov
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Reviewed by Rob Ammons

decades, the automobile death toll grew unchecked. By 1966—when the first federal auto safety law was passed—more than 50,000 people were dying each year

in automobile crashes. Lemov reports that more than 3.5 million Americans have been killed and more than 300 million injured in motor vehicle accidents.

Lemov identifies the villains who created this national epidemic by manufacturing cars that emphasized style and horsepower at the expense of safety. The author also pays tribute to the heroes of engineering and politics who fought the auto industry to end the unnecessary carnage on U.S. highways.

Having described the problem’s magnitude, Lemov then provides a chronological account of the 100-year war. He introduces automotive safety pioneers and the fathers of crashworthiness, such as Hugh DeHaven and Dr. William Haddon Jr. He describes the technical and regulatory battles fought against the powerful auto manufacturers that opposed even the most basic safety features, including seat belts, safety glass, and padded instrument panels.

Lemov documents the origins of the auto industry’s mantra-like assertion: “Cars are safe; drivers cause accidents,” which was used to frame the auto safety debate for many years. He chronicles the regulatory and political battles leading to the enactment of the Traffic Safety Act. Providing a beltway insider’s perspective, Lemov describes the auto-makers’ aggressive opposition to federal

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 **TO READ A Q&A** with the author of *Car Safety Wars*, visit www.justice.org/trial.



regulation, federal motor vehicle safety standards, and the creation of what is now known as the National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

An entire chapter is devoted to Ralph Nader's battle against General Motors. Lemov also details the many


safety advances championed by Joan Claybrook, the NHTSA administrator who President Jimmy Carter appointed. Lemov contrasts Claybrook with other NHTSA administrators who have used the position to launch their auto industry lobbying careers.

In later chapters, Lemov addresses recent skirmishes between the auto industry and consumer safety advocates. Even as automakers advertise safety features, they continue to fight the disclosure of adverse safety events, oppose dissemination of early warning data, and quietly enter into secrecy agreements to settle claims before defects are publicized.

Lemov ends the book with a discussion of the recent recalls involving Toyota vehicles with sudden unintended acceleration issues and GM's cover-up of millions of cars with deadly

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ignition switch defects. Probably due to the timing of the book's publication, the Takata air bag debacle, which has led to the largest recall in automotive history, is relegated to a footnote in Chapter 12.

Car Safety Wars is recommended for anyone interested in gaining historical perspective on the issues surrounding auto design defect litigation. The references to primary sources in each chapter's end notes bolster the credibility of Lemov's assertions. Reading the book and learning about the role that lawyers have played in advancing automotive safety is inspirational. 

Rob Ammons is the principal of the Ammons Law Firm in Houston. He can be reached at rob@ammonsllaw.com.

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