

The feds did it — and auto makers got the blame

There was a scene in the macabre classic "Catch 22" when the hero confronts a guy who just murdered a woman by throwing her out a window. When the police crash into the scene, of course they immediately arrest the hero and let the bad guy go.

Somewhere I got that feeling watching a recent "Prime Time Live" show about how many automotive seat belt systems have been redesigned to become less effective in real-world use than the old-fashioned, manual, three-point belt system.

I've written more than a few columns on the subject, pointing a hopeful finger at the screwy U.S. safety regulations and policies that led auto companies to engineer these systems, under protest.

Now comes Diane Sawyer, representing the big-time media investigative type, crashing through the door, and takes . . . you guessed it

domestic auto companies to task for doing what Joan Claybrook and Ralph Nader, among others, insisted that they do.

AT THE HEART of the issue is the notion of a so-called "passive restraint," the buzzword invented by safety advocates who insist that a seat belt that operates, more or less, without any thought or action on the part of the driver or his passenger is statistically superior to a belt system that provides superior protection but (horror!) has to be buckled by the user.

The "passive restraint" advocates can usually be recognized by the way their pants have a habit of dropping to the floor, unless, of course, someone assists them in buckling up. But I digress.

It took one of the most remarkable feats of engineering in the auto business to develop a fully workable, extremely effective three-point belt



auto talk
Dan McCosh

system and a car structure to withstand a 30-mph impact — about the limit of most car's crashworthiness today. But superior crashworthiness wasn't enough for advocates of the "passive" philosophy, mainly espoused by former head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Joan Claybrook.

Ms. Claybrook, et al, demanded extraordinary efforts to make seat belts more "comfortable" — hence more likely to be used — which prompted the development of a belt that allowed a driver to induce slack in the belt at will — problematic if

there is too much slack. Another unfortunate response from auto engineers was today's silly networks of motors, door-actuated belts, etc., which do nothing more than remove the driver from responsibility for buckling up.

FOR TOO LONG, even airbags were promoted as a "passive" device, rather than an incremental improvement over three-point belts that offers additional, rather than passive, restraint.

Ultimately, the "passive" mania

prompted the creation of many belt systems that, obviously, meet all U.S. government crash standards but still were not as effective as a solidly placed, well-located standard belt system that was secured by its user. If you want to see a truly effective belt system, check out any racing car or a car prepped for a Hollywood stunt — they use a full harness, waist and shoulders, and buckle it themselves.

It's interesting that European countries never bought the "passive" argument, philosophically or otherwise, and standard European issue is the same old three-point belt discouraged by the U.S. regulators. Also interesting is that in the United States, Volkswagen, followed by the Japanese car companies, pioneered the silly seat belts that plague us today, although most manufacturers followed suit until Chrysler led the way out of the jungle by putting airbags (and manual belts) in all its

cars. Prime Time Live, meanwhile, takes all this information and somehow manages to put the blame for the current seatbelt fiasco squarely on the domestic industry — even twisting snippets of testimony given when the domestic automakers were protesting the shift to passive systems to somehow argue that the engineers knew that passive belts weren't as good as manual belts and changed them anyway.

The fact that it was a federal agency, supported by so-called consumer groups, that forced the change to passive belt systems was ignored by Ms. Sawyer, who seems awfully quick to grab the good guy and bustle him off, while the real culprit is left standing by the open window with a gully look on his face.

Dan McCosh is automotive editor of Popular Science magazine.

datebook

● **INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS**
Thursday, April 4 — Industrial Relations Research Association meets in Detroit. Information: 524-1385.

● **DIRECT MARKETING**
Thursday, April 4 — Direct Marketing Association of Detroit meets in Southfield. Information: 258-8803.

● **MANUFACTURERS INFO**
Monday, April 8 — Free information night about production and manufacturing management program for manufacturers begins at 6:30 p.m. near Rochester. Information: 370-3120. Sponsor: Oakland University.

● **INTRO TO LOTUS 1-2-3**
Mondays, April 8-29 — "Spreadsheets for Use in the Home or Business" begins at 7 p.m. in Bloomfield Hills. Fee: \$85. Information: June Fasang, 645-3635. Sponsor: Cranbrook Schools.

● **WOMEN IN COMMUNICATIONS**
Tuesday, April 9 — Women in Communications Inc. meets at 6 p.m. in Troy. Information: 790-7175.

● **VENTURE GROUP**
Tuesday, April 9 — Southeastern Michigan Venture Group meets at 8 a.m. in Troy. Information: 689-4094.

● **BIRMINGHAM CHAMBER**
Tuesday, April 9 — Birmingham-Bloomfield Chamber of Commerce meets at 11:30 a.m. in Birmingham. Information: 644-1700.

● **COMPUTER FRAUD**
Tuesday, April 9 — "Computer Fraud: A Basic Course for the Auditor" in Farmington Hills. Fee: \$240. Information: 655-2288. Sponsor: Michigan Association of Certified Public Accountants.

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● **CONTROLLERSHIP**
Tuesday, April 9 — "The Role of the Chief Financial Officer (Controller) in the Growing Organization" in Farmington Hills. Fee: \$240. Information: 655-2288. Sponsor: Michigan Association of Certified Public Accountants.

● **BEGINNING COMPUTER**
Tuesdays, April 9-30 — "Beginning Computer" begins at 7 p.m. in Bloomfield Hills. Fee: \$75. Information: June Fasang, 645-3635. Sponsor: Cranbrook Schools.

● **PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS**
Wednesday, April 10 — "Interviewing, Mentoring and Performance Appraisal Skills" in Farmington Hills. Fee: \$220. Information: 655-2288. Sponsor: Michigan Association of Certified Public Accountants.

● **TRAINING SOCIETY**
Wednesday, April 10 — American Society for Training and Development meets at 5:30 p.m. in Southfield. Information: 354-2570.

● **BUSINESS COMMUNICATORS**
Wednesday, April 10 — International Association of Business Communicators meets at 11:45 a.m. in Southfield. Information: Nancy Skidmore, 540-5490.

● **BUSINESS WOMEN**
Thursday, April 11 — Leads Club meets at 7:30 a.m. Information: Jo Anne Kusudo, 641-2756.

● **CAREER WOMEN**
Thursday, April 11 — National As-

sociation of Career Women meets at 11:30 a.m. in Farmington Hills. Information: 626-0752.

● **INVESTMENT SEMINAR**
Thursday, April 11 — Free investment seminar begins at 7 p.m. in Troy. Information: 963-6700. Sponsor: Rooney & Co.

● **WORDPERFECT 5.0**
Thursdays, April 11 through May 1 — "WordPerfect 5.0 (word processing)" begins at 7 p.m. in Bloomfield Hills. Fee: \$85. Information: June Fasang, 645-3635. Sponsor: Cranbrook Schools.

● **PURCHASING MANAGEMENT**
Thursday, April 18 — "Emerging Purchasing and Supply Strategies for Competitiveness and mini-seminar 'Buyer/Seller Partnering' at the meeting of the National Association of Purchasing Management in Metro Detroit at the Embassy Suites hotel in Southfield. Information: 1-773-3737.

● **HUMAN RESOURCES**
Thursday, April 18 — Human Resources Association of Detroit meets. Information: 524-1385.

● **WAGE ADMINISTRATION**
Tuesday, April 23 — "Wage and Salary Administration" in Detroit. Information: 517-355-5591. Sponsor: Personnel Management Program Service school of labor and industrial relations Michigan State University.

● **FRANCHISING SEMINAR**
Tuesday, April 30 — Free franchising seminar 7-9 p.m. in Rochester Hills. Information: 853-5500. Sponsor: The Ink Well of America Inc.

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Time: Saturday, April 13
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Place: Livonia City Hall
33000 Civic Center Drive
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Speaker:

Daniel P. Murphy, CFP®
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