

GM, U.S. travel odd, parallel paths



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AUTO TALK
Presidential gadfly Ross Perot got his 30 minutes of fame the other night and I have to confess that he had my attention, but not for the reason you might guess.

Mainly, he had the instincts of a good reporter, which is to say he had a sharp focus on the problems, but not much in the way of a solution.

This is, of course, the same kind of flurry he made during his short stay at GM, harping about quality and efficiency, then leaving them with a phone system that still doesn't work.

Still, there is an odd parallel between GM today and the U.S. government, in the sense that they both are mired in bureaucracy with loads of unproductive overhead, stymied by entrenched interests that defend

their turf with the ferocity of a Los Angeles street gang.

Perot pointed out that currently there is only one American farmer for each federal employee in the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

At GM today, for every guy actually bolting a car together there are six or seven milling about on breaks, in executive suites, laid off or retired.

Perot's story about the Department of Agriculture leads up to a tale about a guy alone in his office, crying. How come?

'My farmer died,' he says.

At GM these days, sometimes it seems like they find the one guy left still working, and fire him.

It seems like the folks running for president don't really have much of a solution, other than wishful hope that the economy will, eventually, get better.

Then they close another air force base.

At GM, they have the new E-team, hot new executives fresh from Europe where they sliced

market share away from the likes of Fiat, Volkswagen and Renault in a market protected against the Japanese.

Frankly, I think competing with Toyota in the U.S. is a little tougher.

Both the government and GM are plagued with excess capacity. In the case of the government, this has resulted from the unexpected demise of the Soviet Union, plus the sudden substitution of fax machines for the U.S. Post Office.

In the auto business, 'excess capacity' is mainly a polite way of saying nobody is buying your cars.

There is, of course, a fundamental difference here, since in the auto business cutting so-called 'excess capacity' is another way of saying you are giving up, whereas having a problem with excess capacity in the military means you won.

A key issue in the campaign is health care. Likewise at GM, where they are just as confused as the government about what

to do about it.

Having no control over the price, GM tries to cut its cost, slicing benefits to reduce its own payroll costs.

Curiously, GM cut the benefits for future employees the most, who will eventually find themselves working to pay for retirement benefits current GM management voted themselves and those currently employed.

This, of course, is modeled after the U.S. social security system.

The main hope for GM is that despite its problems it still is one of the largest repositories of industrial and technological capabilities in the world. The sheer size of the place makes it an economic entity all by itself, and its healthy revival could well be the spark that leads to a much broader based recovery.

That, of course, would be good for both GM and good for the country. I don't think it was Perot that said that, but somebody did.

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