



LETTERS



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calculation was applied to every year from 1979 through 2002. Adding the fatality difference computed for each year shows that by merely matching the mediocre safety performance of these countries, about 200 000 fewer Americans would have died in the period 1979–2002.

These trends continue. In 2005, the United States recorded 43 443 traffic deaths—the highest total in 15 years.<sup>3</sup> Sweden recorded 440—its lowest total since the 1940s.<sup>4</sup> Among US states with smaller populations than that of Sweden, 23 recorded more deaths than Sweden, 11 recorded more than twice as many, and 1 (North Carolina with 1534) recorded more than 3 times as many.

The obsessive focus of US policy on vehicles rather than on effective countermeasures is at the core of our dramatic safety failure.<sup>2(p389–407),5</sup> It is driver behavior<sup>6</sup> and government policies addressing driver behavior (belt wearing, drunk driving, running red lights, speeding, and so on) that substantially affect casualties.<sup>2(p332–358)</sup>

In commercial aviation safety, the United States leads the world. In 2002, there were zero fatalities.<sup>7</sup> Yet (for operational reasons) modern aircraft are far less crashworthy than those in earlier high-fatality years. Aviation safety succeeds by focusing on preventing crashes, not surviving them. Road safety should adopt this focus.<sup>8,9</sup>

The introduction of Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) in 1978 was followed by increases in (1) total fuel used, (2) the percent imported, and (3) annual miles traveled per vehicle.<sup>2(p89–91)</sup> Total fuel use is determined by economics, not by details of consumption. Expecting CAFE to reduce fuel use is about as sensible as expecting to cure an alcoholic by insisting that he drink out of a smaller glass.

The most effective policy is to increase fuel taxes. This is politically unacceptable, but we feel that we must do something, no matter how irrelevant. As a nation, we are like a 300-pound patient asking a doctor to reduce his weight—but with the stipulation that the treatment must not mention diet or exercise.

For both safety and fuel, it is government policies, not vehicle characteristics, that are crucial. ■

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**PUBLIC POLICIES DETERMINE TRAFFIC DEATHS AND FUEL USE**

The purpose of this letter is not to dispute or endorse Robertson's<sup>1</sup> detailed findings, but to question their relevance. As documented in my book *Traffic Safety*,<sup>2</sup> vehicle characteristics are not central to either safety or fuel use.

The relative unimportance of vehicles to safety is revealed by comparing fatality time trends in different countries.<sup>2(p381–388)</sup> From 1979 through 2002, Britain, Canada, and Australia reduced fatalities by an average of 49%, compared with 16% in the United States. If US deaths had dropped by 49%, more than 16 000 fewer Americans would have died in 2002. The corresponding