

## INROADS

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**AAAM Former President Still Crash Free***Submitted by Leonard Evans*

I read "AAAM Former Presidents Saved by Airbags" (Inroads Vol. 18, Issue 1, Jan 2012) with a profound sense of relief that our distinguished colleagues were not seriously hurt. The much happier situation would have been no injuries sustained in crash-free trips. Sure beats trip to hospital, x-rays, hematoma, sore chest, etc.! The letter offers thanks for these minor injuries to an architect of what I call "The Dramatic Failure of US Safety Policy." This failure is analyzed in detail in the chapter with that title in my 2004 book *Traffic Safety*. (The JAMA reviewer called this chapter the *showstopper*).

The core of the failure is an obsessive focus on making it safe to crash, rather than on reducing the risk of crashing. Seventy years of scientific study of traffic safety make it abundantly clear that the overwhelming factors affecting your risk in traffic are (1) how you drive, and (2) how the other drivers drive. A more science-based focus of US safety thinking could more than halve the harm from crashes. This is not wild speculation. Many countries have already cut their traffic deaths by far more than half (details in my recent presentation *Dramatic Failure of U.S. Traffic Safety Policy Kills Tens Of Thousands Annually* (Google title to find it on u-tube). US and Swedish data for 2010 show that (compared to their respective all-time highs) the US reduced its fatalities by 40% (to 32,788) and Sweden by 78% (to 287). If US deaths had dropped by this same 78 percent, the US would have experienced 11,932 deaths in 2010. This is over 20,000 fewer deaths than actually occurred in 2010! China reduced its fatalities by 38% from its 2002 all-time high of 109,381 - the same percent reduction as the US. However, China reduced its deaths by 38% in seven years, whereas it took the US 37 years (1972 to 2009) to achieve the same reduction.

I close my chapter and u-tube presentation with a sense of despair, quoting Goethe: "There is nothing more fearful than ignorance in action."

The only way to achieve major reductions in traffic harm is to reduce the risk of crashing. Reducing harm after crashes occur contributes, but by limited amounts. Government is responsible for almost everything that happens in traffic. The best way to achieve safety is by sensible policy sensibly enforced. The crashes reported would almost certainly not have occurred if speeds were just a tad lower, or following headways more like the recommended 2-second minimum (one observational study found that the average following headway was far less than the recommended minimum!). Speeds would be lower if limits were lower, if traditional enforcement better, if camera radar-speed detectors deployed, if car-makers did not glorify unsafe driving in their advertising, if devices to detect police radar were banned (as in Canada), if drivers deeply understood that speed is at the heart of traffic safety, and the

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things we in the USA are bombarded with constantly, such as vehicle safety recalls, Toyota phantom acceleration, crash-tests, and a host of safety gadgets, are of minor or zero importance. If any of the above (or other) measures had led to no crash, no one would be thanked. However, individuals whose positions led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of additional Americans, and millions of additional injuries, are identified in my chapter and presentation.

As the "Inroads" letter to which I am responding was personal, let me end on a personal theme. I claim in *Traffic Safety* that I have never been involved in a traffic crash. This claim (still true) is contained in a chapter showing how to remain crash free. It begins with an extensive discussion of car-following, rear-end crashes, pileups, and how to avoid participating in them. It ends with 8 specific tips. One is "Do not purchase any auto insurance beyond minimum legal requirements". I have adhered to this advice since I started driving, and recommend that all drivers do likewise in order to further reduce my risk.