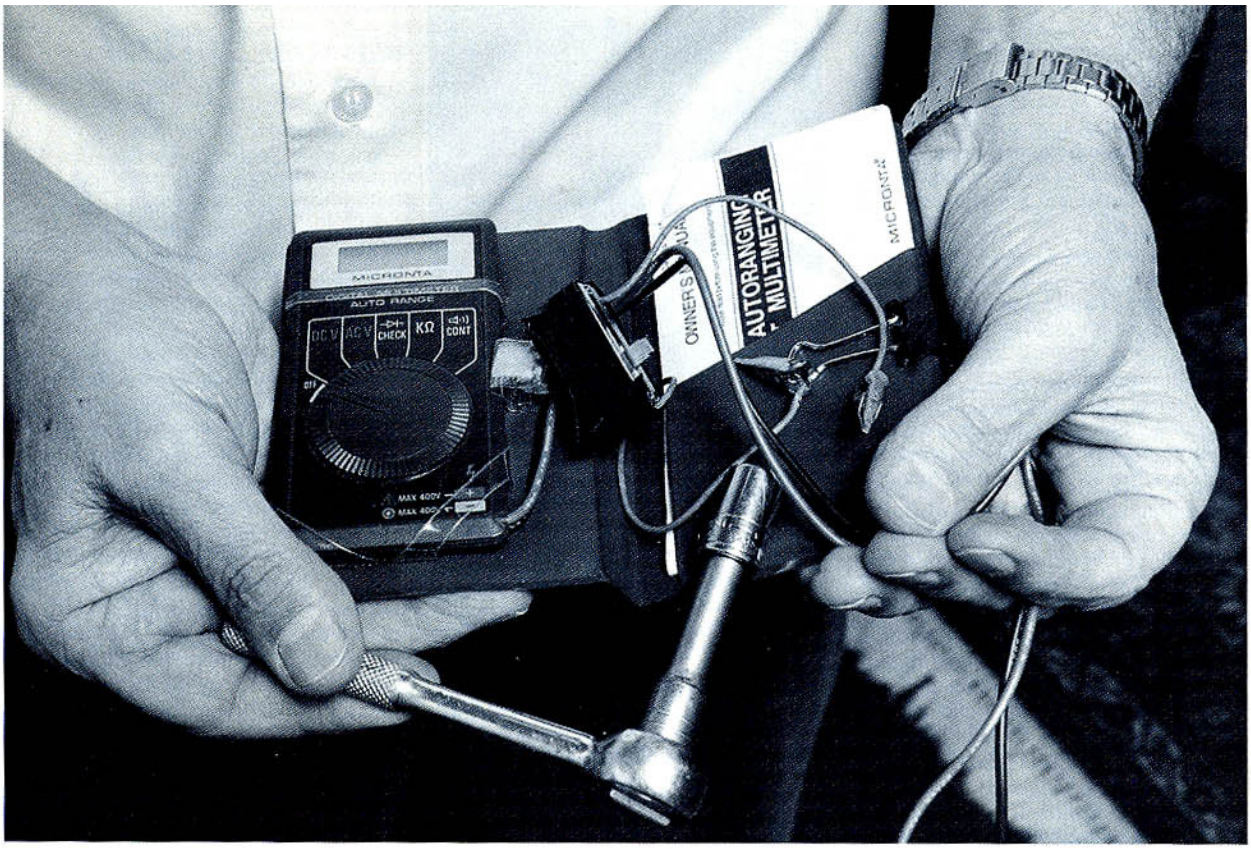


Just Saying No to Airbags

Dealers and mechanics face federal prosecution if they disconnect your airbag. But the law allows you to do it yourself.

BY PATRICK BEDARD

Eric Stork first buckled his seat-belt in—he has to think a moment—1955. He went to Sears, bought a set, and bolted the ends through the rusty floor of his '52 Dodge. Remembering, he laughs. "It was the best I knew how to do." His black eyebrows rise Groucho-style above his glasses, still black like paintbrush bristles after the 70 years that have turned his hair December white. "Now I realize they'd have pulled right out—no anchors."

In the Army, he'd been a photographer for the camp newspaper. The MPs often rousted him from bed to shoot nighttime car wrecks on the highway past the camp. "I saw such terribly injured people, it made a coward out of me about driving," he says.

Forty years after he clicked his first belt, the same concerns were playing in his mind as he drove his new 1995 Mazda 626 home to the northern Virginia suburbs just outside Washington, D. C. Airbags had become controversial, stories were appearing in newspapers. So he started digging. "One of my friends is a safety consultant, had a lot to do with airbags at NHTSA. He told me, 'There's not a lot to worry about. The people most at risk are children in the front seat and short, particularly elderly, women.'

"I said, 'Hey, Mike, you're talking about my wife.' That got me quite interested.

"The most recent statistic, when NHTSA announced its [on/off switch] rule in November, is that 2620 lives are deemed to have been saved by airbags since 1990. And 87 people have died as a result of airbag injuries. Well, 87 divided by 2620 is 3.3 percent.

"Now, I'm tempted to say I don't think the Food and Drug Administration would allow a drug to be on the market that was fatal to 3.3 percent of the people who take it."

His voice takes on a steely resonance. "But I don't have to say *I don't think so. I know so.* I used to work for the Food and Drug Administration."

Readers of exceptional loyalty (two decades minimum) may feel some rustling way back in the memory tunnel. Eric Stork? Sounds familiar.

Think Environmental Protection Agency. Think new cars that stalled five times before you could get them out of the driveway. From 1970 to 1978, Eric Stork was EPA *número uno* on automotive smog regs. "Your magazine condemned me mightily," he remembers.

Now retired, his career at various federal agencies dates back to the Eisenhower Administration. Catalysts came to cars during his watch at the EPA, and he laid the foundation for fuel-economy

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICIA FISHER

(CAFE) regulations. "I'm quite proud of it," he says of his regulatory record.

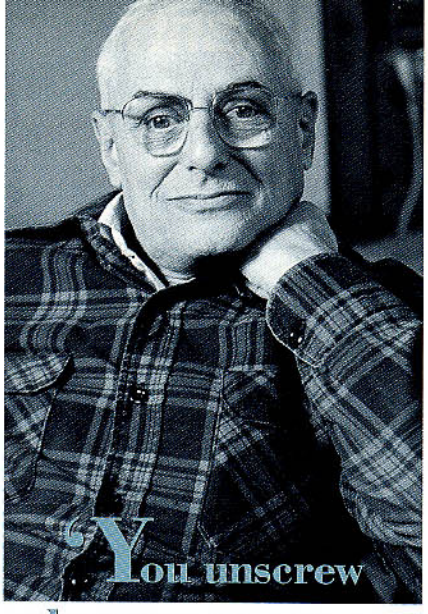
As a career regulator, he knows how to find information in Washington. He attended some of the National Transportation Safety Board hearings on airbags last spring. He quotes Charles Kahane's (NHTSA's top analyst) finding that airbags have zero benefit for occupants aged 70 and above.

Stork and Dottie, his wife, always wear their safety belts. The life-saving benefit of airbags for belted occupants is small, about five percent, he's determined. "What worries me," he says, "are the injuries from airbags. A friend who testifies in liability suits tells me about terrible injuries, people blinded, loss of use of ears. NHTSA says you should drive with your hands on the wheel at four and eight o'clock. In trying to avoid an accident, your hands go all over the place. Then the airbag goes, and your arms splay out. I hear of enormous damage to arms, fingers, hands, elbows, and shoulders."

He returns to the idea of a drug that kills 3.3 percent of the patients who take it. Allowing it would be "unthinkable," he says. But if it were allowed, nobody would be compelled to take it. Drugs are used voluntarily. "Yet under federal law we are forced to have this dangerous device in our cars. I find it appalling federal policy.

"The risk of disabling injury scares the hell out of me," he says. "I ought to have the right to choose my own poison."

Actually, he does have that right, according to the wording of the law. Dealers and mechanic shops are guilty of a federal offense if they disable an airbag without a letter of authorization from NHTSA. But the law makes no mention of individual car owners. So they can do as they like. The only obstacle in the way of disconnecting an airbag, he points out, is knowing how to do it.



"You unscrew the nuts or screws on the back of the steering wheel, lift out the airbag module, and pull the plug. That's it."

Brace yourselves, persistent readers, because Eric Stork, the proud author of automotive smog regs, reveals himself to have been a youthful hot rodder. The buzz words come spilling out: "Crager overhead-valve heads," "ported manifolds," "clearanced wishbones." "I'm a pretty good mechanic," he says.

And like good mechanics everywhere, he enjoys figuring out the problem. He knows that airbags are fired by an electrical signal. So there has to be a wire. "The driver's side is no sweat," he says. "You unscrew the nuts or screws on the back of the steering wheel, lift out the airbag module, and pull the plug. That's it."

On some cars, you must remove plastic panels on the back side of the steering-wheel spokes before you can get a wrench on the fasteners. And don't confuse the airbag connector with the one for the horn.

When you're sure you have the airbag plug, remember its shape, and the number and color of the wires going to it, because you'll be looking for a similar arrangement on the passenger's side. But leave the plug connected for now.

"The passenger's side is more difficult, because there's no obvious place for the connector." He found the one in his car up behind the glove box, after first removing a cover panel under the dash. To make sure it was the right plug, he disconnected it, then turned on the key. The airbag warning light flashed. That's proof, but only if the driver's side is still connected.

At this point, he knew how to disable both airbags—simply unplug each side. But the flashing warning would drive him nuts. He tried a piece of black tape over the light, but the plastic lens splashed reflections around the cluster. He thought about removing the bulb, until he saw how much of the dash would have to be taken apart. There had to be a better way.

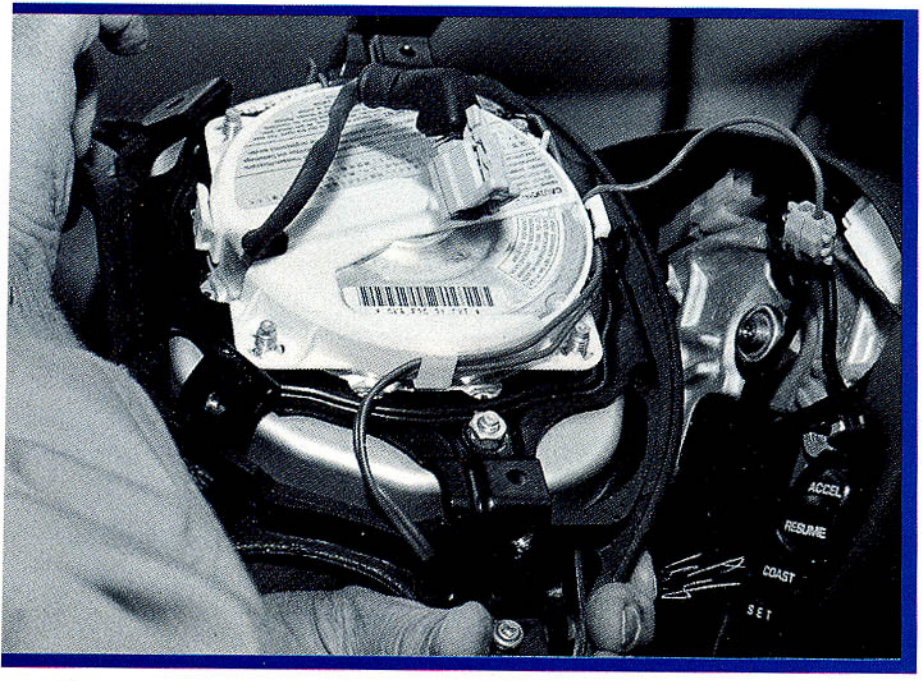
"How does the computer know I've disconnected the bag?" he asks. "It can only know electrically."

He thought about the possible ways. Sensing a lack of resistance in the now-open airbag circuit would be the simplest, cheapest way.

"In the auto industry, you'd sell your grandmother to save a nickel per car. So I thought it's probably resistance."

How much resistance? From his drawer of electrical tools, he shows me an old slide potentiometer that he scavenged from the front panel of some defunct hi-fi equipment. "I can't throw away perfectly good junk," he smiles, tossing off a line that he's surely used for 40-some years to stay the most ambitious of Dottie's housecleaning impulses. Leads with alligator clips dangle from each end of the pot.

To measure the needed resistance, he attached the leads across terminals of the airbag connector on the Mazda's wiring harness. Then with the key on, he adjusted the pot until the warning light went out. That captured the necessary resistance on the pot. Back in the shop, he measured the captured value and dug around in his "perfectly good junk" collection until he found a pair of suitable resistors. Attaching one of them across each wiring-harness plug in place of each disconnected airbag extinguished the warning light.



"I could spin it out," he says. "Be like Garrison Keillor. But that's basically it" for disconnecting airbags.

At this point, the automotive engineers in the audience will say, "Nice piece of surgery, for a government guy." The cheapest, least-effort light extinguisher might have been a direct short across the plug. "It might work," Stork allows. But he never tried it. Not elegant enough to please him.

"Some of my friends in NHTSA tell me that I did the wrong thing, not morally, but technically. They say I'd be better off with an airbag. I disagree. And I may be wrong. But that should be my choice. If I'm wrong, it hurts me."

When Stork left the EPA in 1978, bumped out by the newly installed Carter Administration, the noted *Washington Post* columnist Haynes Johnson called him a "professional bureaucrat, one we've been exceedingly lucky to have around." Clearly, Stork has had a long time to contemplate the role of government. Now he says, "It can be effective only if it performs with the consent of the governed. And that requires that the government not behave in a way that causes disrespect for the whole principle of government.

"Not many people can think through how to disconnect an airbag. I think it's outrageous they can't go to their dealer and say, 'Take this muther off!' without getting special permission, and lying to NHTSA about a medical condition.

"It fundamentally destroys respect for government." ●