

JAMA

The Journal of the American Medical Association

Volume 294(6), 10 August 2005, p 746–747

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Traffic

Traffic Safety, by Leonard Evans, 444 pp, with illus, \$99.50, ISBN 0-9754871-0-8, Bloomfield Hills, Mich, Science Serving Society, 2004.

AMERICANS ARE UNSAFE DRIVERS, AND paradoxically, the work of Ralph Nader is largely to blame. So argues world-renowned traffic safety expert Leonard Evans in his comprehensive and compelling book *Traffic Safety*.

Evans' work covers in remarkable detail the full range of important topics in traffic safety, from sport utility vehicles (SUVs) to drinking and driving to the latest safety technologies, but his chapter "The Dramatic Failure of U.S. Safety Policy" is the showstopper. There he presents statistics showing that the United States went from having the lowest traffic fatality rate among highly developed countries as recently as the 1970s to having a much higher rate than countries such as Great Britain, Canada, and Australia as of 2002. The irony, he points out, is that the media and general public have been too busy lavishing praise on those involved in US safety policy to notice the far greater improvements elsewhere.

What went wrong? In Evans' mind, outcomes of Ralph Nader's efforts epitomize the problem—yes, *the* Ralph Nader who wrote *Unsafe At Any Speed* and brought us airbags. According to Evans, the work of Nader and his associate Joan Claybrook (appointed Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration 1977-1981) resulted in a traffic safety philosophy that has been responsible for 200 000 fatalities between 1979 and 2002. The number 200 000 is an approximation of the reduction in fatalities that the United States would have achieved had it matched the percent reductions in Britain, Canada, or Australia.

Nader, Claybrook, and others prioritized creating safer environments for drivers: more protective vehicles (with airbags, of course) and better designed roads. According to Evans, these innovations have improved safety but not nearly as much as more attention to driver behavior would have. He sees this misguided set of priorities as an outgrowth of the litigiousness of US

society, in which we are quick to blame everybody except ourselves. We put car and tire manufacturers, road designers, and even the weatherman under the microscope, but we leave individual responsibility to our friends Up North or Down Under.

Evans acknowledges that available data make it difficult to quantify systematically the ways in which Americans are less safe drivers. He points out, though, that we have been slower to adopt tough seat belt and drinking-and-driving laws, and we refuse to ban radar detectors, whose only purpose is to allow us to break traffic laws without getting caught. Sociologists could have a field day dissecting the ways in which US drivers seem to demand individual freedom but not responsibility.

Evans' critique of US safety policy is so provocative that it leaves the reader wishing that he had written it in more detail (perhaps the next book?). As it stands, the argument is compelling but feels unfinished. It would be interesting to see, for example, discussion of US communities that have achieved the safety improvements seen in Britain, Canada, and Australia (surely in our diverse country there must be some such areas)? If they exist, what is different about them? Also, more discussion of cross-national studies of driver behavior would be informative. How exactly are Americans worse drivers? Finally, how would the safety policymakers respond? An edited volume presenting both sides would be especially interesting.

Traffic Safety is much more than a pen lashing of US safety policy. Evans, above all, writes like a scientist (he holds a PhD in physics), in the most complimentary sense. Every page exudes a love of numbers, statistics, and analytical rigor. Evans has a clear passion for getting the right answers. For all the strong opinions he lays out, one senses that his agenda is simply to understand how to improve traffic safety. Furthermore, unlike many public health zealots, he acknowledges that safety is not the only goal. Mobility is also important, which is why optimal

speed limits on highways are closer to 60 miles per hour than zero.

A variety of audiences will enjoy this book. Researchers and policymakers will find a clear and detailed summary of current knowledge (much of it generated by Evans himself) regarding the safety associated with vehicle characteristics, weather conditions, roadway design, driver characteristics, alcohol use, airbags, seat belts, state and federal traffic laws, and many other factors. Prospective vehicle buyers will find out which types of vehicles are safest (SUVs: generally safer for the occupants, less safe for everyone else). Drivers will learn several tips for being safer on the road (parents, need a 16th birthday gift?). Finally, people who simply enjoy the use of data to answer important questions will find this book delightful.

As a field, traffic safety offers a treasure trove of data, and Evans happily helps the reader sift through it. His enthusiasm is most evident in sprinklings of humor. For example, he encourages drivers to adopt the recommended following distance (a minimum of 2 seconds) from the car in front of them, even at the risk of, heaven forbid, being passed by another car: "Recapture your few seconds by walking faster to your vehicle, thus improving your cardiovascular health, which will enable you to outlive the scoundrel who cut in front of you!" This line underscores a theme that runs through the wealth of statistics, analysis, and anecdotes in the book: we can prevent nearly all crashes with simple changes in behavior.

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