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Until the fall of 1966, no federal regulatory law or agency—not one—protected Americans from death and injury on the nation’s highways. In 1966, 50,894 people were killed and 1.9 million injured. From the advent of the automobile to 1966, motor vehicle accidents killed more than 1.6 million people in the United States. Then Congress passed two landmark pieces of legislation—the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act and the Highway Safety Act.

If the 1966 fatality rate of 5.50 deaths per hundred million vehicle miles traveled (VMT) had continued, 167,956 people would have been killed in vehicle crashes in 2014. Instead, the death rate was 1.07—a decline of 80% over 50 years—with 32,675 killed. The 1966 federal laws, federal agency and general measures they created—have averted 3.5 million auto deaths over the past 50 years.

In 1965, Ralph Nader’s “Unsafe at Any Speed” exposed the deplorable safety records of auto companies. The book—and subsequent investigation of Nader by General Motors, which put private detectives on his trail—led to Congressional hearings overseen by Senators Warren Magnuson and Abraham Ribicoff. At the Senate hearing, GM President James Roche apologized to Mr. Nader for his company’s probes.

Within months, Congress unanimously passed the Vehicle and Highway Safety Acts, which President Lyndon B. Johnson signed on September 16th. The President stated: “In this century, more than one and a half million of our fellow citizens have died on our streets and highways; nearly three times as

many Americans as we have lost in all our wars. . . . I’m proud at this moment to sign these bills—which promise, in the years to come, to cure the highway disease: to end the years of horror and give us years of hope.”

When Congress passed the Vehicle Safety Act in 1966, the auto industry fought one provision more than any—criminal penalties for violating the Act. Why? Because putting their executives behind bars like common criminals was simply too much to bear. Drunk drivers that kill innocent consumers are put in jail. Why not jail auto executives who approve unsafe designs to save a buck when those designs kill consumers just like drunk drivers do?

Under the influence of corporate lobbyists, Congress imposed civil penalties—but no criminal penalties—on auto companies breaking the law. Penalties amount to, at most, a few dollars per car. Rather than restraining auto companies from breaking the law, the penalties encourage auto companies to violate it by shaving manufacturing costs. The result: Profits go up, and so do the number of unsafe vehicles on the road. If caught, the worst that can happen is a recall and slap-on-the-wrist civil penalty. It’s cheaper to stonewall than recall.

Even worse, civil penalties encourage manufacturers to hire lobbyists to build bigger loopholes into safety regulations rather than hire engineers to build safer vehicles. Weak roofs on rollover-prone vehicles saved the auto industry hundreds of millions of dollars every year while thousands of consumers died because weak roofs on vehicles collapsed in rollovers. Auto lobbyists watered down the original

roof-crush standard in 1971, while auto engineers lamented seat belts would restrain occupants in place only to be killed or injured by crushing roofs.

What other safety hazards would never have occurred if auto executives knew they could be held criminally responsible for their designs? To name a few: Exploding Pinto and Jeep gas tanks; collapsing seat backs that kill children; Takata airbag inflators that explode; GM ignition switches that shut off airbags in crashes; Firestone tires that fail catastrophically and Toyotas that suddenly accelerate.

Until Congress adds criminal penalties to the Safety Act, the 2016 *Car Book* is your answer to finding a new car that has the fewest defects and the most advanced safety features, among them lane-departure correction, radar braking and adaptive cruise control, active pre-crash safety, and automatic crash notification. Use *The Car Book*’s new comprehensive crash safety rating to buy a car to protect you in a crash. Use the Safety Chapter to find the optional safety features you want when you buy a new vehicle. Your buying decision can save your life and send a message to automakers not to withhold vital safety features.

By using *The Car Book* to buy a safer car, you have taken an important first step toward your personal vehicle safety and helping CAS reach our Vision of Zero Traffic Deaths by 2050. The next step is to support CAS which works every day on your behalf to ensure that all Americans ride in safe and reliable vehicles. Go to [www.autosafety.org](http://www.autosafety.org) and find out how you can support the Center and have us be your safety and lemon insurance.