

*Steve Glines*

**Bailout**

My first car was a 1971 GM Chevy Vega station wagon. I paid \$150 in 1974, for a car that had about 40,000 miles. I say about 40,000 miles because the odometer cable had broken but that was the least of its problems. The car had so much rust that the windshield was only held against the car by the windshield wipers and when I depressed the clutch I saw the open road beneath my feet. It was on its third engine. GM's experimentation with aluminum blocks was a disaster. This was a lot more than simple planned obsolescence.

The Vega died for good in front of a Chevy dealership after I drove it for about a year. The Chevy dealer gave me \$150 trade-in towards a Chevy Chevette. It lasted 79,000 miles before so many things were broken it wasn't worth fixing. This was a lot more than just planned obsolescence. I got \$150 trade-in for it. GM made crap in the 1970's and used up all my good will. I'll personally never buy a GM car again and I personally don't care if they survive. They don't deserve to get bailed out.

I tried Chrysler next. In the 1980's I used up three Caravans (one was totaled in a rear end collision) and a Eagle Eclipse which I later learned was actually made by Mitsubishi. None of these cars lasted more than 50,000 miles. Lee Iacoca used up all my good will there as well. They were so badly managed that even Mercedes-Benz couldn't break them of bad habits. Chrysler doesn't deserve to survive either.

Somewhere around 1990 I paid \$500 for an old 1970 Mercedes 220D. It had 345,000 miles on the odometer. Odometers on American cars only had 5 digits. Odometers on my Mercedes had 6 digits. To me that says a lot. Over roughly 3 years I put 100,000+ miles on that Mercedes before it disintegrated in my driveway at 487,000 miles. I was very disappointed that I couldn't stretch its life to half a million miles. I sold the hulk for parts for \$500. I bought a Ford Explorer next.

Actually I leased the Explorer on the theory that if I didn't like it I could turn it back in. I didn't turn it back in but Ford burned their bridges too. During the 1980's the cost of a medium sized car doubled. I paid around

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\$10,000 for my first Caravan and about \$18,000 for the last one. The Ford Explorer was around \$18,000.

When it comes to cars I have a bit of OCD, obsessive-compulsive disorder. I want a car that not only looks sharp but also feels and sounds sharp. When I close a car door I want to hear that special “thunk” that only comes from perfectly matched machined parts. Most European cars have “it” and keep it, so do a large number of Japanese cars. My Ford Explorer had “it” when I bought it. My “German Junker” Mercedes 220D still had it at 487,000 miles. None of my GM or Chrysler cars ever had “it.”

Since it was leased I only kept my Ford Explorer for 45,000 miles. I didn’t ride it very hard. I used 4 wheel drive in the winter a few times and went off road twice but by the time the 3 year lease was up the doors no longer had that special “thunk.” By 45,000 miles they went “ka-thunk,” making the sound of mismatched metal climbing into the lock position. I could easily picture what happened. To save a little money, Ford used slightly thinner sheet metal and fewer welds than their Japanese or German competitors. It seems American cars are designed by accountants not by engineers who know what it takes to make a “tight” car. By 45,000 miles the hinges on the doors of my Ford Explorer began to sag from their own weight. When the door is closed there is little weight on the hinges so the hinges can only sag when the door is open. How long do the doors of a Ford Explorer have to be open before the metal warps and the doors are misaligned? Three years, roughly 1000 days, four trips a day, 8 opening and closes of the door times 20 seconds equals only about 45 hours of open doors. Aluminum foil and duck tape anyone?

At the end of the lease I knew I didn’t want to keep that Explorer but I wasn’t ready to give up on Ford as I had GM and Chrysler. I asked the salesman what deal I could get for a new Explorer. He said that the new Explorers were \$32,000. I looked at him in astonishment and with some disgust yelled, “It’s just a fucking truck!” My daughter piped in loud enough for everyone in the showroom to hear, “You know Dad, for that price you could buy a Lexus.” So I did and I’ve never bought an American made car since and probably never will.

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I no longer care about any of the American auto companies. They don't deserve to survive. They have proven over and over again that they are not willing to manufacturer what I want with the quality I want for a price I consider reasonable. Some talking head on television said that Toyota and GM sold the same number of cars last year and that Toyota made a profit of \$7 billion while GM managed to loose over \$35 billion. They don't deserve to survive. Under the tutelage of all those Harvard MBA's American manufacturing has become a joke, close what we used to think of when we saw the label "made in China," in other words Junk.

What would happen if we let Ford, GM and Chrysler go belly up? After the weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth died down, nothing would happen. We would still have to buy automobiles and we'd continue to buy them from the same companies we've been buying them for the last few years, which is from Japanese, Korean and European companies. Most of those "foreign" companies manufacturer their cars here in America anyway so what's the difference? American Workers will still make the cars Americans drive. The only jobs that will be lost are the management tier of the Big Three automakers. Is that a loss? Is that worth a bailout? Maybe it is.

When I was a kid memories of the World War were still fresh and the Cold War was hardening into the very real possibility of a nuclear Armageddon. We practiced ducking under our desks and at the edge of town was an active armory full of weekend warriors. A few miles further down the road was a Nike anti-aircraft missile base. There were all sorts of military installations hidden in nooks and crevices all over America. They were the "Strategic Reserves," kept in mothballs for years, just in case. Every county had its "Army airbase" that turned into the county airfield, which by 2000 had become either a golf course or a towering row of condominiums. We've closed so many bases and sold so much "national" infrastructure you have to wonder if we could again mount the same kind of effort needed to win World War Two. That's where an automaker bailout makes sense. We need heavy industrial manufacturing capacity just in case. Think of this nightmare: China in conjunction with Iran declares war on us. Stranger things have happened. We loose our source of oil and computers. Suddenly we need to build lots and lots of heavy equipment. Think of the scale: The air force

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currently has about 1000 fighters during WW2 we manufactured over 200,000. GM made many of them.

Michael Moore, that icon of personal grooming, made a suggestion worth repeating. In World War Two, President Roosevelt told GM to stop making automobiles and to start making tanks and aircraft. Moore said that President Obama should tell GM to stop making cars since they don't know how to make them anyway and start making railroad cars for public transportation. That would be ironic. In the early years of the twentieth century a network of light railed vehicles, trolleys, crisscrossed America. It was said that at one point you could take trolleys and heavier rail from the Canadian border in Maine to the tip of Key West. During the 1920's GM bought up independent trolley companies and ripped up their track forcing people into automobiles. We didn't complain.

President (elect) Obama wants a massive works project that will fundamentally change the way America operates while creating millions of jobs. What could be better than building a public transportation infrastructure that lets people get from anywhere to anywhere in America, without a car just like we could a hundred years ago.

America is going to change one way or the other. If we do nothing we may find ourselves with just one American automobile manufacturer, Ford, and a vast belt of rusting, empty and dilapidated former automobile factories. We have let American industry languish while we've become a country of consumers. In the 1960's the Iron and Steel industry left America following the textile industry in the 1950's. In the 1990's the electronics and computer industry followed. If we allow the automobile industry to go as well the only thing left will be the rape and export of our natural resources and our once mighty industrial fortress will have been replaced with endless strip malls. Do you want fries with that?