

Letters to the Times I Didn't Send

by Charles Komanoff

I don't write to the *New York Times* about cars as often as I used to. It's gotten harder to muffle my disdain for car culture in all the layers of nuance the *Times* requires. What I want to do is grab the writer or editor by the shirtfront and shout, It's the car, stupid. As in this sample culled from responses to a single edition, Thursday, Feb. 10.

"It's the Reckless Driving, Stupid"

Dear sportswriter:

I was moved by your remembrance of Kansas City Chief linebacker Derrick Thomas, who was killed in a car crash last week at age 33. Thanks for depicting Thomas's community work as well as his considerable athletic gifts.

But spare me the claptrap that Thomas and a passenger died because they weren't using seatbelts. They died because Thomas, like so many American he-men, had a penchant for reckless driving. On a slippery highway, during a snowstorm, Thomas's sport utility vehicle (what else?) was seen speeding and weaving across the roadway before it rammed the median and flipped several times.

By all means though, let's hear it for the seat belt that saved the guy in the back seat. I can't wait for his testimonial to "buckle up, America." It would be perfect in commercials showing those kick-ass SUV's zipping through blizzards.

Charles Komanoff, a T.A. member since 1974 and T.A. president during 1986-92, is active with the pedestrian rights group Right Of Way.

Provocateur is an exploration of ideas related to cycling, walking, or the impact of car culture on how we live. It is intended to provoke indignation, reflection and just plain thought. Provocateur does not reflect the official position of Transportation Alternatives.

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On the cover: Remembrance rally, January 9, 2000 at City Hall. Photo by John Lawson

"It's the S.U.V.'s, Stupid!"

Dear editorial writer:

Oh dear. Those sinister OPEC countries — the ones with all the oil — "conspired last spring to cut production by millions of barrels a day."

Conspired, you say? How about the 20-year conspiracy by U.S. auto and oil corporations to boost oil consumption by exempting so-called light trucks from fuel-economy standards?

From that loophole swarmed the hellspawn of sport utility vehicles, pickups and minivans that now devour a million or more extra barrels of petroleum each day compared to ordinary cars. That, no less than OPEC cutbacks, is what's sending the price of heating oil through the roof.

As for high-minded Senator Chuck Schumer's proposal to release a flood of oil from the strategic petroleum reserve — Schumer would do better to honor his 1998 campaign pledge to undo the one-way toll on the Verrazano Bridge that has loosed a plague of 18-wheelers in Brooklyn and lower Manhattan.

"It's the Kids Outside the Car, Stupid"

Dear managing editor:

You did it again. For the umpteenth time, you ran an article reporting "stepped up efforts" by auto corporations and their government sidekicks to get parents to "restrain" (love that word!) their kids inside the family car. What you failed, as usual, to mention was that half of the children killed in crashes aren't riding in a car: they're run over by one.

"Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for children in America and they are taking a terrible toll on families," intones the head of the National Transportation Safety Board amidst the on-board computers and "smart" rollbars at the Chicago Auto Show. "On average, five children under 10 die each day in car crashes," the NTSB chief said.

But what kind of child restraint system will save the 50 percent of children killed by cars on the sidewalk or in the street?

The possibility that the true solution lies in drivers exercising care for all kids — and driving less — evidently lies in some parallel universe, never to be visited by the *Times*.