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Does the future hold one car per household?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—I'm often both villain and victim when it comes to environmental issues. I don't recycle enough. I don't compost at all. I consume coal-fired electricity and eat feedlot-fattened meat. The literary wind I generate powers nothing.

Worst, I drive.

I scold myself for being a paler shade of green.

Villain and victim is, I think, the message of Carjacked: The Culture of the Automobile and Its Effect on Our Lives, by Catherine Lutz and Anne Lutz Fernandez (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Where Americans once saw the car as a ride to freedom and self-expression, Lutz and Fernandez argue that, today, its costs exceed its benefits when everything is counted. Cars, they argue, cost too much to buy and maintain; involve more than 40,000 fatalities a year; drive us into an expensive, oil-centered foreign policy; create suburban sprawl and endless congestion; and pollute our air, water and land.

Even if vehicles ran on nothing and created no pollution, Lutz and Fernandez argue that they would still be agents of death and injury, still create sprawl and bumper-to-bumper commuting, still require expensive public investment in roads and bridges and still consume natural resources inefficiently.

I'm old enough to remember when driving a car was fun, not a guilt-trip.

And who doesn't recall the sacrificial lamb that bore our learning-to-drive mistakes? Mine was my mother's turquoise and white, 1955 Chevy Bel-Air 150, a two-door sedan with a manual shift linked to an almost non-existent six-cylinder engine. Her '55 was the stuff of putt-putts to office and supermarket, not hot-rod dreams.

My dad bought her -- and me -- a new black Valiant in 1962 when I was a high-school senior. It was slung low on its narrow-stripe whitewall tires and featured quirky lines, which inspired a few quirky lines of my own in the dark. I thought it was pretty cool until a college girlfriend called it the "squashed pig." She drove a 1927 Model A Ford with New Hampshire plates, which, I had to admit, was a lot cooler than my dorky Plymouth pushbutton automatic with its receding chin and unnoticeable suburban squeal.

Forty years later I taught my daughter, Molly, to drive in an ancient-but-

patient Toyota farm truck. I drove us out into the middle of 150 acres of open pasture, locked it into low-range, four-wheel drive and told her, “Let ‘er, rip.” We bucked and reared for a week or two and tore up the sod at a speed of about three miles per day.

Molly grumbled that I was a “bad Daddy” for forcing her to learn on a manual transmission when every other kid was steering an automatic. Eight years later, of course, she lords it over suitors who can’t drive a stick.

Along with nostalgia for different cars in which we’ve done different things, most of us remember legendary traffic jams, close calls and crashes. Car freedom is never free—the Carjacked point.

Our vehicle fleet has grown in step with our population and our wealth. Registered vehicles increased from about 74 million in 1960 to about 240 million last year. If our population hits 400 million in 2039 as projected, we would expect to see 315 million vehicles at the current ratio. The wealthier the household, the more vehicles it operates.

While it matters how our growing number of vehicles is fueled, converting the fleet to greener power only solves one part of the problem that they create, as Lutz and Fernandez see it.

The Carjacked logic leads to the conclusion that Americans and the rest of the world need to rely more and more on fewer and fewer passenger vehicles for reasons beyond petroleum dependency and air pollution. But Lutz and Fernandez don’t follow their argument to where it points, namely, state-imposed limitations on private vehicle ownership. I can understand their reluctance.

When a government decides that its people should use fewer or less of something “for their own good,” it can limit availability, ban it completely, tax it or punish its use. People routinely subvert such limits through passive resistance, open defiance, bootlegging and black markets. Most things that have been outlawed are readily available.

A huge tax would reduce the number of new vehicles produced and sold. Such a tax would hurt our car-centric economy and each of us in many ways while falling heaviest on those least able to bear the weight. We might end up like Cuba, nursing our limping oldies into the sunset.

A policy that limits the number of vehicles an individual can own would foment rebellion. No American government could manage that policy unless the people were uniformly convinced that alternative choices were worse. It’s hard to imagine a consensus like that in light of our current debate over man-made global warming and its remedies.

Ours has been a vehicle-dependent economy for 100 years. Maybe it's the hand we are fated to lose with.

But a reasonable partial solution is mass transit where it can be done. Might Washington suggest that the bail-out babies, Chrysler and GM, produce fewer cars -- which they're good at -- and more trains, trolleys, subways and buses? Is creating a market for these products beyond us?

I grew up riding Pittsburgh's electric street cars, which is one reason why I like light-rail trains.

I now take Amtrak to New York City from Virginia rather than drive or fly. It's cheap, comfortable, as reliable as the alternatives and not stressful. It's as fast as driving and far less dangerous. It's almost as fast as flying and a lot friendlier. No searches, no seizures and very big seats.

If you lay a transparent Amtrak route map over a map of Interstate highways, you quickly see that this one type of public road now offers more than twice the mileage of passenger rail. People gave up on trains 50 years ago, because cars were cheap and more convenient. Passenger rail, with all of its problems, is an increasingly attractive choice to highway driving with all of its problems.

President Obama announced this week that he was putting \$8 billion of 2009 economic-recovery money into 13 high-speed rail projects. Unfortunately, much of that manufacturing will be done abroad, and these funds aren't adequate to complete the projects. Still, a little economic engine is better than none at all.

Between 1980 and 2007, the mass-transit share of highway and mass-transit passenger-miles together declined from 0.015 percent to 0.010 percent even as mass-transit mileage rose from about 40 million miles to 52 million, according to the U.S. Bureau of Transportation. It might be useful to think about what differences a 20 percent mass-transit share would make in our lives.

Mass transit is off-the-shelf technology. People use it when it's available. But its downside has always been financing—finding money for investment and generating income to cover current expenses, whether the system is publicly or privately owned. Financing mass transit, however, seems an easier problem to solve than those associated with a growing vehicle fleet. Mass-transit systems make no sense in rural America where we are not massed up. We have no economically feasible alternatives to cars and pick-up trucks, though, like others, we're likely to shift toward smaller models and downsize the number we have around.

Individuals can make some choices that reduce the impacts of our need to drive four wheels and an airbag. The less we choose to make them on our own, the more likely it is that we will be taxed in that direction, or worse, ordered.

That ugliness is a ways off, but you might be able to see it coming...at 55 mph.

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