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# TECHNOBABBLE

MIND-NUMBING DETAILS, EARTH-SHATTERING

REVELATIONS AND TECHNICAL HERESIES

## MOMENTUM

# Kills!

BY DAVE COLEMAN



Everyone else is an idiot. That is the realization I suddenly reached when, while driving a small, fast, nimble Civic Si, I looked up and realized everybody else was in an SUV. I have made my opinion of these lecherous vehicles clear in the past, but now there is a new opportunity for me to bring it up again. The Ford Excursion. It seems every automotive journalist has taken some level of offense at Ford's latest mega-SUV, but nobody has offered a viable solution to keep the car's existence from ruining life as we know it. I have that solution.

More offensive than the Excursion's boxcar styling, airplane hanger proportions, or Valdez fuel consumption is the sheer burden of mass it places upon the earth's crust. This preposterous vehicle weighs in at a mantle-mangling 7,688 lbs. Like the distance between galaxies or the speed of light, a curb weight of more than 7,000 lbs is so out of proportion with normal human experience the mind simply can't grasp its enormity.

Think of it this way: A single Ford Excursion weighs as much as a new Toyota Celica GT-S, an Acura Integra GS-R, a Mazda Miata, and me after a good lunch! Three cars and one skinny engineering editor just to make up the weight of a single vehicle! All that weight makes perfect sense hauling two UPS trailers or tugging freighters around in the harbor, but when the sole purpose of that vehicle is for a discontented 5' 2" mother of two to shuttle her wailing offspring to and from the Mega-Lo-Mart, something is dreadfully wrong. There oughta be a law!

And that, believe it or not, is my point. I am the last person to suggest adding

more bureaucracy to our streets, having been on the wrong side of our current traffic laws more often than not, but I think I have a solution to the SUV problem that will simplify the law books and make our world a better place.

Step one, naturally, is to remove every speed limit in the country. They are more irrelevant with the arrival of the Excursion than they ever were. Speed limits, at least in the minds of the "Speed Kills" crowd, are there to protect us from the certain carnage that comes from crashing into something. But now that the something into which we will crash (or, more likely given its handling ability and the under-qualified crew at its helm, will crash into us) weighs 7,688 lbs, those of us with the common sense to drive something reasonably sized are going to get clobbered, even at the speed limit. The problem is not speed, it's momentum. An Excursion plowing obliviously into a Chevette full of nuns will, because of its tremendous momentum, unleash an unholy three times the destructive energy as a Ford Focus plowing into them at the same speed.



Most people have a pretty decent understanding of this phenomenon, and upon realizing they are surrounded by two- and three-ton rolling boxes of death and destruction, head immediately to their local dealer to buy something even bigger. If there is going to be carnage, why not be on the giving, rather than the receiving end? It is simple, Darwinian instincts that have brought us to this point, and if we don't make some changes to the playing field soon, our roads will be clogged with angry mothers in Peterbults.

Momentum is a much more logical thing to regulate than speed. Momentum is simply the product of mass and velocity, and it is momentum, not speed, that tidily sums up the destructive potential of a moving vehicle. It is time we finally remove the unreasonable, unfair, and unproductive burden of speed limits from our roads and replace them with momentum limits, thus simply and effectively leveling the playing field and allowing anybody to crash into anything with any vehicle with fair and equitable expectations of destruction.

Momentum is typically expressed as kilogram-meters per second, since physicists have kilograms as their mass measurement of choice, and meters-per-second as their favorite expression of velocity. To appeal to the non-metric masses, though, we would have to use something slightly clumsier, like pound-miles per hour, or pmph for short. If we assume the average vehicle weighs about 3,500 lbs, and want to set the speed limit for an average vehicle at 70 mph, then we have a momentum limit of 245,000 pmph.

With our freeways flowing at a steady 245,000 pmph, Susie Soccer Mom will be trundling along in her Excursion at a safe and sane 31.8 mph, while you, in your stripped-to-the-bone, 1,900-lb CRX, will be legally allowed to drive 128.9 mph. That is a world I can live in. Of course, the earth

burdening SUVs will have to be relegated to the right lane where they will not impede the flow of lighter vehicles.

There are some collateral benefits to a momentum limit that might not be immediately obvious. Clearly forcing SUV drivers to trundle along at parking lot speeds will rapidly shift buying trends away from SUVs and back toward cars that are allowed to travel at reasonable velocities (Hint: Sell your SUV now before the momentum limit causes prices to drop!) But less obvious is the fact that enforcement will get exceptionally difficult. The police will have to throw out their radar guns and try to develop some way to measure both mass and velocity simultaneously. Simply basing mass on the type of vehicle simply wouldn't be fair. Since an Excursion can seat nine people,

one loaded down with the lower Estonian wrestling team could easily weigh 2,250 lbs more, for a gargantuan grand total of 9,930 lbs. Speed limit: 24.7 mph. Good luck calibrating your radar guns for that one, boys.

Real trucks, and I mean big tractor/trailer semi trucks, typically weigh around 40,000 lbs, relegating them, on average, to a jogging pace of 6.1 mph.

The federal limit for a tractor/trailer is 80,000 lbs, though, so the really loaded ones will trundle along at a slow mosey of 3 mph. This could spell a big boom in the railroad industry, would clear the trucks off the road, and would simplify the design of those few remaining semis used for local deliveries. Who needs 13 forward gears when you can't even go 10 mph?

Not only does the switch from speed to momentum allow us to drive faster, make the roads safer for everybody, and reduce traffic congestion, but it will jumpstart a dying industry and bring trains back to the American countryside! Maybe I should go into politics... ■

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