

The Alternative Line

by Joe Holzer for Publication in CNY-PCA Redline Report Copyright 2007 <http://www.holzerent.com>

So How Come ... ?

Given the engineering which goes into all automobiles today, but especially into Porsches, it should be no surprise to learn that a disproportionate number of Porsche owners are engineers, when compared with the general public. This statement has not been actually verified by your humble servant, per se, but rather is based on the people I have met in the course of my activities in PCA lo these many years. I doubt it would be a difficult item to quantify, though. As a group, engineers tend to try to solve any problem they encounter with rational thought if not numerical analysis. You would think with all the problems in the world today that engineers would be held in high esteem, because they solve problems. But I am aware of only one US President who was one; Jimmy Carter (a nuclear engineer with Navy experience under Adm. Rickover, widely recognized as father of the US Nuclear Navy). And his presidency will never be used by anyone as a “stellar example” of the genre. It would seem one reason is that most engineers would make lousy politicians. So how come he actually became one, and President at that? Remember Watergate? Still wonder?

Political problems, as opposed to technical ones, are far more daunting not because they are inherently more difficult, but because there are usually a certain group of zealots who actively want to assure failure of any effort aimed at their elimination (the problems, not the opponents, though one might often WANT to shift the focus). And so they take a variety of steps to make the problems more intractable. For example, an engineer with a structural background could certainly be expected to design a bridge. The famous Mr. Roebling was one such man, and his work has far outlasted all his detractors. Yet it was made enormously more difficult by precisely those naysayers, almost all of whom had no technical qualification whatsoever to question his designs, but who somehow had the ability to impede his progress at every turn. That ANYONE can drive across any water surrounding Manhattan is more a testament to his perseverance than any technical aptitude. And you can be certain, if the entire “Big Dig” of Boston was any indicator, that adding another bridge today would be even MORE difficult, both despite and because of our greater technical understanding.

When the Tacoma Narrows bridge was erected, all the known vertical forces as well as the horizontal forces of wind and water were factored into the calculations. Unfortunately, nobody realized the aerodynamic effects of wind passing above and below the span would cause it to flutter like a feather in the wind, which caused it to fail spectacularly. That failure, though, advanced the science of bridge building. Making it possible for us all to drive over them without a second thought. Similarly, as you well know, Porsche used its failures in racing as well as on the street to make their cars unequaled – There is No Substitute. Equally, we are even safer while traveling in a tin can across an ocean at 35K ft. because of what was learned over a number of years of people not arriving as planned.

So how come they justify allowing people to climb Everest? Sure, the equipment used by climbers has improved, through the efforts of those same engineers with input from the climbers. But the risk, and the statistical probability of death, are still enormous. They even make TV shows about the fact that people die doing it, as if in celebration. It was fatalities which forced the organizers to eliminate actual “street circuits” which were not bound in chain link and concrete; our own Watkins Glen merely a single example.

We often hear the mantra “speed kills” as gospel for why we have to drive within the posted limits, which of course NONE of us do. But get a ticket for going OVER the “allowed – ie the speed below which they won’t stop you” and the ticket, and points, will reflect the POSTED rather than the allowed, thereby adding a “pile-on” of points, with all the silly games played for revenues. And they certainly enforce – it is a physical impossibility to drive between Syracuse and Albany on the most expensive land-based road in the country without having your forehead tattooed with microwaves. So the question of the day; why are there not cops standing at the bottom of Everest ticketing anyone stupid enough to believe their skill can overcome the dangers presented by that climb, like there are on the safest highways in the Western Hemisphere? Why do we applaud the antics of “Caught on Tape” and “Jackass – The Movie(s)” as they risk life and limb with far less actual ability to affect the outcomes of their stunts than Driver’s Ed provides for us?

We regularly hear how many accidents are “caused by speed” without anyone seeming to do even the most rudimentary critical review. So I posit a question for you; if everyone on a road is doing 100 mph, but cops don’t catch them on radar and they don’t crash, are they not like the tree which falls in the forest with nobody to hear? When you factor in all the people who traveled JUST as fast as the guy who STOPPED too quickly, but they didn’t hit anything, he becomes a statistical anomaly – precisely what the climbers, stuntmen and jackasses think “the other guy” is when they pay the price for their mistakes. So how come it is only DRIVERS who suffer from that? When was the last time anyone was penalized by a judicial system for flying too fast? How about drinking too much, if it doesn’t involve driving? We celebrate rocket powered boats, and except for the WAKE damage, only physics limits the ultimate speed for boaters. Walkers are never prevented from running, unless they would be truly endangered, as for example around a pool where slipping could have severe consequences. But nobody gets their ability to walk REMOVED for running twice in 18 months!

Even investors, if the recent past is any indicator, have no real restraints. In fact the world's governments are pouring resources into the financial markets where these guys got reckless and didn't even bother to understand what the risks of their investments looked like. And handguns are protected by the Second Amendment despite the fact they provide NO benefit to society EXCEPT possibly to be used in preventing a crime. And even there, the vast majority of times they are fired with intent, and create a victim. And one has only to look at me to recognize the problems of fast food. No amount of study can reduce the risk through skill development on my part, unless that skill is to push away from the table sooner (like that's about to happen ;-). And can somebody really explain cigarettes except as a tax generator? In fact, based on the legal activities lately, the best parallel would be for the guy who drives a 911 Turbo through a downtown at speeds beyond the pale, even with speed limit signs and other traffic controls all around, and then sues the manufacturer because they "should have prevented the possibility". Absurd, you say? It actually happened. And they WON!

So how come it is not possible to rise above the mundane and mediocre on the highway even while there are few such restraints on much of the rest of life? When you can explain that to me, drop me a line. But remember – I am an engineer. I am trained to do critical review – to ask "what's wrong with this picture", and to factor the results thereof into a real plan to fix whatever's broken.

Don't hold your breath waiting – there are WAY too many who benefit from the status quo. Like politicians. See why engineers make such lousy ones... ?

