

The Alternative Line

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This One's For You, Carol...

What, exactly is a "Sport Utility Vehicle"? Given the propensity for marketing jargon, and the plethora of new anagrams to euphemistically describe what has become less and less differentiated from the masses around it, EXCEPT in the minds of those marketeers, I think we all need a little remedial education. For English as a FIRST language, please press "1".

The term "Vehicle" is not too controversial. Most understand it as a mechanical means to transport oneself from where one is to wherever it is one seeks to be. Within limits. I know Janis Joplin saw her 356 as a vehicle, but I doubt the heroin and Southern Comfort concoction that killed her would be viewed as such, whatever trip her mind was on. I used to believe the word "Sport" was equally well understood and relatively benign, until I started seeing some of the "staged for your pleasure" "sporting" events recently foisted upon us. Apparently our attention spans are believed to be about half that of an ADHD on crack. Are they kidding? But perhaps my reaction is merely a function of my own musculo-skeletal response to seeing "More Outrageous Stupidity Caught On Video", aka *Jackass the movie(s)* for those who never intended it.

But I always believed "Utility" was a combination of function and usability in application to a specific purpose. OK. So what exactly IS an SUV? The earliest examples were used by the US Army, and were so perfect for the role (roll?) that they were adapted by every army on the planet in one form or another; the Jeep. As it was adapted to the new realities of combat and soldiers, it morphed into the Humvee we know so well. And like "Ahhnold", many people saw ways they could use these military purpose vehicles in less violent applications. I once heard an apt description of the difference between two wheel drive and four wheel drive as the distance they have to be pulled from the woods. But I digress...

Clearly, not EVERYBODY who buys one is stupid, despite my oft repeated remark that "SUV" means "Stupid Urban Vehemouth". There are some applications for which they are absolutely perfect, and for which there is simply no substitute worthy of mention. If you have to take a troop of six boy scouts on a camping experience which is NOT to be in an RV, which is more like a hotel room on wheels, it is pretty hard to beat the Chevy (or GMC) Suburban. At the opposite extreme has long been the Jeep Wrangler, whose genetic tracing back to the original Army Jeep is unmistakable. And for a top-down (including, thankfully, bikini ;-) romp along a sunlit beach, they are hard to beat even if you must pay exquisite attention to how you turn to avoid rollovers.

But come on; the latest crop of these wannabees is nothing more nor less than a tall station wagon. Glue 100% Natural artificial woodgrain vinyl shelf coating and fiberglass riveted furring strip down the sides, and you'd have a car Mike Darminio would love to rally ;-). Even Chrysler temporarily brought back that gag reflex with their "woodie" hot rod throwback, which otherwise has NONE of the attributes which made ANY of its progenitors the anti-establishment icons it purports to represent, and looking all the more absurd for it. But they sold like hotcakes. Just like SUV's. And despite the cost of gas as a percentage of the cost of ownership being four times that for a typical sedan, their sales have not dropped anywhere near as precipitously as the cost of gas has risen. Why?

There seems to be a variety of answers. And, as I have noted elsewhere, given a particular set of circumstances, each of us in the absence of external forces will make the choices we individually believe to be in our own motivated self interest. Despite whatever excesses capitalism generates, and they DO unmistakably happen, that fact is the true basis for the existence of, and ultimately dominance by, the United States. It is as evident in fashion on a Beijing street today as it was on a British street in 1944. We, for better or worse, had the immense good fortune to have popped from a womb here rather than so many other places on the planet. And that allowed us the maximum freedom to be and do whatever we were individually capable of. But that same factor almost inevitably meant an SUV would be in our driveway while it would be unlikely in that of an equally educated and experienced person in Mumbai India. Because our society has always rewarded excessive "Here I Am"ness. And an SUV is anything BUT subtle.

And don't kid yourself into thinking that you are "above" that. MOST buyers of Porsches do so for their status cache. How else to explain their relative abundance in major metro areas where their capabilities can NEVER be realized? Now to assuage some of our collective guilt, I will reiterate that experience WITH my Porsches has changed my reason for ownership to an almost desperate NEED. And it is STILL for a status, though only acknowledged as such after having it reflected in my introspective mirror, when I realized that I need a tool worthy of my capability to wield it.

This thought came to me during a recent session with another “status” symbol of our culture; my “shrink”. I had just returned from a business trip to Rutland VT and was tired from the drive. I got a call from Doc I telling me the session I had earlier cancelled because of the trip was still available through a mixup in communications. So I decided to take it and rushed out. Those who know the area are familiar with the Onondaga Lake Parkway, which has the village of Liverpool at one end and the Carousel Mall / I-81 interchange at the other, two lanes each way. Leaving Liverpool, traffic is usually both lanes, and heavily policed for 30 MPH until passing the park, when it opens to 45 or 55 posted winter / summer respectively. Most times traffic merges to the right before the train bridge about a third of the way toward I-81, EXCEPT for those who will instead be heading to Park St, which leads to Carousel Mall. That is a left “exit”. Just as with Morgan & Henry Clay roads heading north from the same village, a large percentage of the traffic stays left the entire way, despite the same legal requirement to “Keep Right Except To Pass” as to obey the speed limit. Unfortunately, since they will be turning left sometime before they run out of gas, and there has never been a single citation issued for failing TO keep right, I do not expect this practice to change anytime soon.

But I suffer the symptoms of Road Rage when some Mor... (sorry, I promised) person stays in the left lane until about 20 ft from the ramp, then ducks back right to go to I-81 South, having held behind them a line of traffic which was TRYING to travel faster than that dolt, who invariably is at EXACTLY the speed of the car alongside, and oblivious to the crown bunched behind. Let me say right here that I believe that a person in the right lane has every right to drive as slow as they want. It is discourteous to not pull off and let the crowd by if possible, and becomes insulting on long winding stretches without passing opportunities. But so long as it is a multi-lane road, that slow driver is no different than a truck climbing a long grade; I have no right to fault them for something beyond their control.

But I cannot fathom why someone would stay left at exactly the same speed (or, worse, SLOWER) as the car alongside. Newtonian Physics says that one ahead of the other is no more likely to collide in that circumstance than ones alongside. So why not pull behind (or in front if you must be obsessive) on the right, and allow by those who, perhaps, will be jail bait down the road a bit. Do they see it as their civic duty to regulate everybody’s velocity to whatever they feel is the threshold they will not exceed, as a means to protect us from ourselves? Possible, but unlikely. Is it “I cannot go faster, so why should you”? Again, possible, but that would require their awareness of your existence, and few other evidences of that appear. Far more often they are literally oblivious. I wish I had a dollar for every bozo I have seen fly by me while they multi-task on the cellphone, only to then slow down but stay in the same passing lane once they hang up. That is the whackiest logic I have ever seen. But I’ll bet anything most of you have seen exactly the same.

I had just such an oblivian in the left lane of the Parkway. And after the third car passed him on the right, I figured he was on his/her way to the mall. So I also passed on the right. Then they pulled right. No signal. No glance at a mirror or over a shoulder. Simply “I’m here, watch out”. That is when I snapped, and my mental illness set in. So I started slowing incrementally until I was at 30 mph. Other cars were whizzing by, but bozo stayed behind all the way to the 81 ramp, where I sped up rather than be an annoyance to everybody else.

I discussed my “Road Rage” with Doc I that night. Despite recognizing its futility, I had to rationalize the following analogy; If you could play an instrument well, how long would you sit in a room listening to someone who couldn’t? And that’s when it hit me WHY I need a 911. And why I expect I’ll continue to exhibit road rage. And while I doubt you’ll see me buying a Cayenne anytime soon, I at least can sympathize (empathize) with Carol. So, Skip, get off her case. Everybody’s instrument is different. Yours is a Horsche...t.

