

**Quote of the week:** *"Is there any chance that the Camry Hybrid will be recalled...I just want to find out if you expect it ever to be on the recall list, for any reason."*

- Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) questioning Toyota CEO Akio Toyoda and COO Yoshimi Inaba in the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

Toyota: The staged "health care summit" is going on as you read this missive, but until that, the biggest thing going on in D.C. has been the Toyota hearings. As most regular readers of this laptop report know, I was in the car dealer business for 25 years before I lost my mind and went into politics. Before I get into my thoughts on this, let me make it clear that I have never worked for, or had a Toyota, Lexus, or Scion dealership. In fact, Toyota was the "enemy" since most of the cars I sold were in direct competition against Toyota vehicles. Unfortunately, Toyota generally won that competition since they are now the largest car manufacturer in the world. So, I have no loyalty to, nor any ties with Toyota. And, truth be told, I actually don't personally like Toyotas very much. They are very competent cars that I find uninspiring.

OK, so maybe I'm happy to see my former "competition" grilled on a spit before Congress? Not really. In the words of Yogi Berra, "It's deja vu all over again."

In 1984, the TV show 60 Minutes did a piece on "unintended acceleration" in the Audi 5000 sedan. At the time, I was an Audi dealer. Their report highlighted several horrific stories of people whose cars accelerated by themselves and the show reached the conclusion, with the help of an engineer, that there was something seriously wrong with these cars. In the time before cable news, this widely watched show nearly destroyed Audi and it took over a decade before the company and its sales could recover in the United States.

It later was revealed that there was nothing wrong with the cars. The "unintended acceleration" was the result of people confusing the accelerator and the brake. Thinking their foot was on the brake, as the car accelerated unexpectedly, they would press harder, thereby moving the car even faster. This is similar to a pilot in bad weather becoming disoriented and confusing up from down. I have experienced this very same phenomena while earning my private pilot's license many years ago and it is certainly a very scary feeling. Pedal confusion happens, and has happened with some occasion in cars over the years.

Fast forward to today. Congress is enormously unpopular and deservedly so. It seems as

though we (Congress) like to find somebody to punish in order to take the focus off of how much the public dislikes us and the fact that we are not doing what the public wants (like improving jobs and the economy). Plus there are a few conflicts of interest that should be noted:

- Two of Toyota's major competitors, GM and Chrysler, are owned and run by the very government currently "prosecuting" Toyota.

- Toyota's 14 plants in the U.S. are non-union. Their government-owned competitors are the UAW. The UAW is a major Democrat constituency.

- Trial lawyers, another major Democratic constituency, stand to gain from such problems in dollar amounts that will make the biggest Wall Street paycheck look like minimum wage.

So, I think there may be some unspoken agendas here that motivate many in Congress to encourage the demise of Toyota. That being said, I have no idea what problems exist with Toyota cars or how serious they are. But that's the point. 60 Minutes jumped to conclusions about Audi, and they were wrong. Some of the recent testimony has involved victims who said that they had their foot on the brake, parking brake engaged, car in neutral, and shut off...yet it still accelerated wildly. For that to happen, multiple simultaneous failures would be required to a degree that is truly hard to imagine.

Cars today are pretty amazing things. They are highly complex mechanical and electronic devices that perform their function remarkably well despite the abuse of all kinds of bad roads, weather, and drivers. But they are not perfect. Neither are the people who drive them. Wouldn't we do the public a better service by explaining what might cause the problems and the various actions a driver can take to keep them from becoming serious or fatal? For example, no engine is strong enough to overcome the force and friction of fully applied brakes. If your car is accelerating unexpectedly because of a floor mat or some other cause, the brakes will stop it if you have your foot in the right place. You can also put the car in neutral, turn it off, or use the parking brake. You might not think of these things in an emergency unless you already know what to do. I have experienced various accelerator pedals sticking in my long experience with many cars, both old and new, and I am just used to the things I need to do when it happens. Toyota clearly has some faulty parts here, and they have not handled these known problems as quickly and openly as they should have. Customers have every reason to be upset about that. But the question is whether this all warrants Congressional investigation, especially when we in Congress have a few problems of our own doing that we are not addressing.

Anyway, I'm not here to defend my former competitor, Toyota. But I do try and call 'em as I see 'em. Any business employing Americans today deserves a fair hearing, and I'm not sure Toyota has gotten one.

By the way, 60 Minutes never ran a retraction of their inaccurate story on Audi. And I have never watched a single segment of that TV show since.

I remain respectfully,