

THE BLOWUP OVER AIRBAGS

By Warren Brown

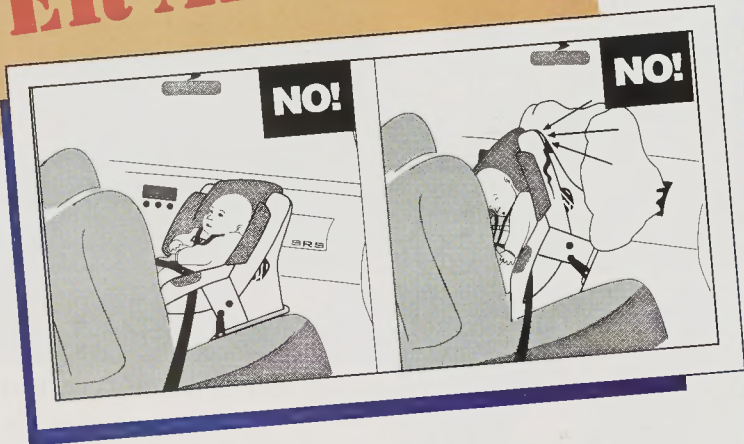
Maybe, I misunderstood. Maybe, I never heard Joan Claybrook give unvarnished praise to the current generation of airbags--pouches designed to automatically inflate and protect vehicle occupants in car crashes.

Claybrook is president of Public Citizen--self-described as a "nonprofit citizens' research, lobbying, and litigation organization based in Washington, D.C." And she is a former administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), having served in the Carter Administration from 1977-1981.

In both jobs, Claybrook has been a staunch advocate of airbags, or so I thought. Now, she is changing her tune, saying she's known all along that airbags--the current generation--are imperfect, that they can kill and maim under certain circumstances. She says she is amazed that the auto industry waited so long to make airbags safer.

That's quite different from what Claybrook wrote in her 1984 book, "Retreat from Safety: Reagan's Attack on America's Health." Thirty-seven pages of that book are devoted to a chapter on transportation safety, with the primary emphasis on the long political and regulatory battles fought to get airbags into today's cars and trucks. In the book she lauds the "superb and reliable performance" of airbags--the same airbags that now are blamed for the deaths of 32 children and 20 adults.

Claybrook was assisted in that political/public relations campaign by the media and the automakers themselves. The media were loathe to question her sanctification of airbags for fear of being lumped into bed with the devils who opposed the technology--the automakers, those paragons of Evil Big Business. And the automakers did a fairly lousy job of making their point about the downside of airbags, often couching their arguments in statements that made it seem that they were more concerned about production costs than saving lives.



As a result, we are confronted today with a public safety conundrum: Should we bother using a safety device that sometimes has proved tragically unsafe?

The answer is, "Yes." The reason is simple: Airbags have saved far more lives than they have taken--an estimated 1,600 lives saved over the last decade compared with 52 lost in airbag deployments in the

same period, according to NHTSA.

The problem is that, for way too long, the media, government, and passionate airbag supporters in consumer groups have failed to tell you that airbags can hurt you. That failure, of course, obviated the need to tell you how to protect yourselves and your families--especially young children--in airbag deployments.

Here is a primer:

- Current airbags deploy--that is inflate--at speeds of up to 200 miles per hour. That's no "soft pillow of air." That's a wallop that can knock you silly if you don't take precautions.
- That means you should NEVER put infants and young children in the front seats of passenger cars. They should be placed in the rear and strapped into appropriate child-protection seats.
- Drivers 5'2 and shorter ought to sit at least 11 inches away from the steering wheel, putting some distance between you and the airbag should it deploy.
- Everyone in a moving passenger vehicle should wear lap belts and shoulder harnesses, as they are your primary safety devices in auto-crash protection.
- If your car has no rear seat, or if you absolutely must carry a small child in the front passenger seat of that vehicle, it makes sense to have the passenger bag deactivated.
- The government is pushing the development of "smart" airbags, which are designed to regulate airbag deployment speeds based on the weight of the person sitting in front of the bag. The government wants car companies to have these "smart" systems ready for the 1999-model year.

But, hey, no "smart" system can override a lack of common sense. Nor can any "smart" system outfox the laws of physics. Buckle up. Drive sober. Put children in the rear seats of passenger vehicles whenever possible. Do those things, and you won't have to worry much about what I, or Joan Claybrook, or anyone else has to say about airbags.