

Lee Iacocca and the Ford Pinto

From Iacocca, Lee (with William Novak), *Iacocca, an Autobiography*, 1984, Bantam Books, NY. Pp. 171-172, reprinted with permission.

“I can’t talk about bad cars without a few words on the Ford Pinto. We brought out the Pinto in 1971. We needed a subcompact, and this was the best one you could buy for under \$2000. A lot of people must have agreed – we sold over four hundred thousand Pintos in the first year alone. This made the car a great success and put it in the category of the Falcon and the Mustang.

Unhappily, the Pinto was involved in a number of accidents where the car burst into flames after a rear-end collision. There were lawsuits – hundreds of them. In 1978, in a major trial in Indiana, the Ford Motor Company was charged with reckless homicide. Ford was acquitted, but the damage to the company was incalculable.

There were two problems with the Pinto. First, the fuel tank was located behind the axle, so if the car got hit hard enough from behind, there was the possibility of a fire.

The Pinto was not the only car with this problem. In those days, all small cars had fuel tanks behind the axle, and all small cars were occasionally involved in fires.

But the Pinto also had a filler neck on the fuel tank that sometimes, in a collision, was ripped out on impact. When that happened, raw gas spilled out and frequently ignited.

We resisted making any changes, and that hurt us badly. Even Joan Claybrook, the tough director of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and a Nader Protégé, said to me one day: “It’s a shame you can’t do something about the Pinto. It’s really no worse than any other small car. You don’t have an engineering problem as much as you have a legal and public-relations problem.”

Whose fault was it? One obvious answer is that it was the fault of Ford’s management – including me. There are plenty of people who would say that the legal and PR pressures involved in such a situation excuse management’s stonewalling in the hope the problem will go away. It seems to me, though, that it is fair to hold management to a high standard and to insist that they do what duty and common sense require, no matter what the pressures.

But there’s absolutely no truth to the charge that we tried to save a few bucks and knowingly made a dangerous car. The auto industry has often been arrogant, but it’s not that callous. The guys who built the Pinto had kids in college who were driving that car. Believe me, nobody sits down and thinks: “I’m deliberately going to make this car unsafe.”

In the end, we voluntarily recalled almost a million and a half Pintos. This was in June 1978, the month before I was fired.”