

# CAR and DRIVER

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IT WASN'T RALPH NADER

## Who Killed the Corvair?

COLORED NEED NOT APPLY

## Is Racing a White Man's Sport?



AN (IR)RATIONAL ALTERNATIVE

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# R.I.P. CORVAIR

## 1960-1969

*The cause of the Corvair's  
death was a simple lack of guts*

—By Robert Cumberford

Suppose you are head man in a big-time motor works, profitably building the most reasonable car on the market. For argument's sake, let's say you have this car that handles as well as anything on the road, has set the style for everyone else to follow, is an engineering *tour de force* that gives better mileage than a Rambler American, handles snow like a Saab, stops faster than a Stingray and costs less than three grand optioned to the teeth. Then imagine that a half-qualified weirdo wanders onto the scene, telling anyone who'll listen that you are a bad guy, since you *used to* build a car that wasn't as good. Just suppose all this incredible stuff was true, what would you do? Quit? Give up? Cop out? Open the memory tube and un-invent it? Let's face it, you wouldn't be the first to be castigated. If history offers any precedent, consider the now legendary Model T Ford. It was a rolling booby trap, dangerous indeed to the unwary. Steinbeck lovingly told of being put up against the wall by his Liz when he cranked it with the levers in the wrong places. And thousands of arms were broken by kicking cranks. Henry Ford fixed all that with the Model A, of course, and he was proud of it. But suppose Upton Sinclair had put the knock on the T in 1928, claiming that since the Lizzie had had some faults, *all* Fords were menaces to the American Way. Would Ford have said, "Oh, sorry. I'll just stop talking about my Model A and quit making it as soon as I possibly can, Mr. Sinclair?" Hardly.

Then why is the Corvair dead?

No guts. That's why.

When the desert winds began to change from friendly zephyrs to ominous der-vishes, General Motors simply folded up its tent and skulked off in the night for the sanctuary of the nearest Holiday Inn. Ralph

Nader didn't kill the Corvair, *they* did . . . the grey, faceless men in the corporate structure who don't concern themselves with cars, just with money.

You must remember that G.M. is in effect a nation-state in itself, complete with Byzantine intrigues, political parties, militant factions, great lords and great rebels. Power within the corporation shifts constantly, without public knowledge, and the corporate equivalents of blood feuds and vendettas do exist, as does the code of *omerata*. Men may nurture ideas for years, even for decades, before they are able to implement them.

The Corvair embodied many long-buried dreams. It was born of them, and because of them it died.

The oldest of the dreams, perhaps, was direct air cooling for its engine. No less a personage than the celebrated "Boss Ket," Charles F. Kettering, Director of Research, embraced that idea, in 1918. He pressed hard for the freedom it would give engineers if the radiator and water pump and hoses and valves could be eliminated, and in so doing he nearly collapsed the entire enterprise we now know as G.M. It was Kettering who convinced G.M. founder William C. Durant that air cooled engines were feasible (true) and an economically sound idea (debatable). Subsequently, Kettering was also able to convince duPont, and the company marked time for two years while the Dayton engineering Lab boys tinkered. Eventually, Semon Knudsen, father of future G.M., and now Ford's Golden Boy, got the air-cooled engine out of the lab, and into the New York auto show in January, 1923.

A bomb, utter and complete. They made 759 of them, junked 239 inside the factory, wholesaled about 300, and stuck retail cus-

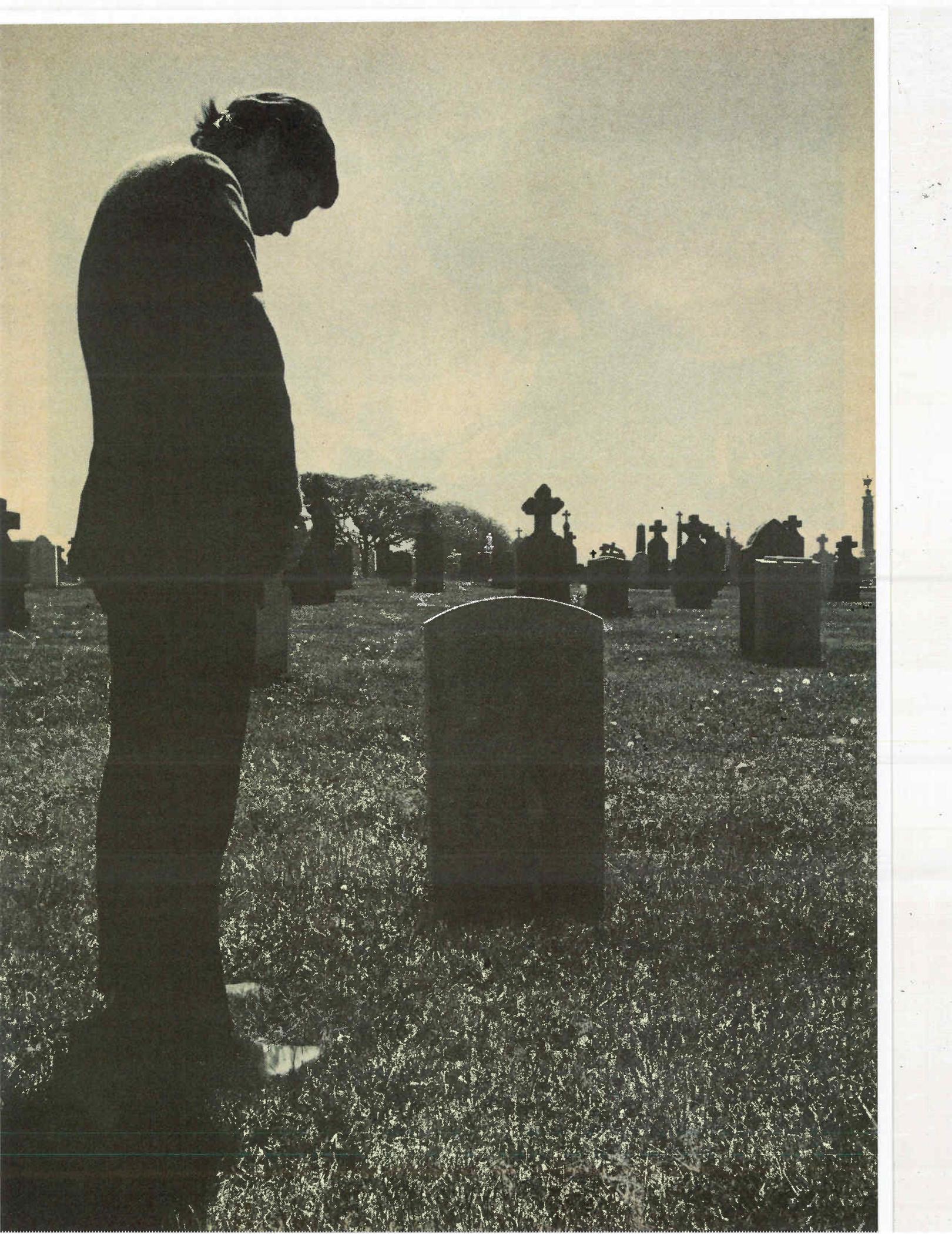
tomers with a hundred or so. Bad? So bad that Chevrolet (coincidence, it is not), the division fronting for the "Copper Cooled" engine, recalled them all. (All but the one Henry Ford bought, which remains in his museum to this day.) The others were taken care of by the first and greatest of the grey men, Alfred P. Sloan, in the simplest possible way: He had them loaded on barges, towed into Lake Erie, and dumped. A precedent had been set.

Kettering offered to resign, of course, but Sloan talked him out of it, to the eventual enrichment of the corporation. Did he talk him out of the idea of an air-cooled Chevrolet? Have Texans forgotten the Alamo?

One of the ways G.M. manages to keep its good engineers is to allow them scope to play with their cherished ideas. Currently there are dozens of "toy" cars in various staff and division experimental departments, and over the years there have been hundreds of them. Sometimes, rarely, these are shown to the public to convince critics that serious efforts are being made to explore new thinking. You'll remember Zora Dun-tov's CRV-1 single seater, or the Pontiac two-stroke minicar that was recently featured in one of the crooked-kitchen-cabinet-and-homemade-rowboat magazines.

Present G.M. President, Ed Cole, was allowed to make himself such a toy in 1946. His thing was rear-engined cars. Because he is a very good engineer, Cole built his first rear-engined car with the power unit ahead of the rear axle, and he put dual tires on the back to handle the extra weight. Seeing this, it is hard to see how he ever allowed the original Corvair to be such an ill-handling device. Especially since General Motors was firmly and officially on record as say-

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## R.I.P. CORVAIR

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ing that an air-cooled, flat-six, rear-engined 4-door sedan with swing-axle rear suspension was not the type of vehicle G.M. would choose to produce.

That description fits the original Tucker as neatly as it does the Corvair, and G.M. experts testified, in the 1948 fraud hearings against Preston Tucker, that such a car would not be safe, practical or reasonable. The experts may have convinced Tucker, at least partially, since he abandoned air cooling, but they didn't convince the jury—or, evidently, Ed Cole.

Nor, apparently, did the experts convince the G.M. Engineering Policy Committee, which was the ultimate authority for putting the Corvair into production.

So the Corvair appeared, shocking a lot of people to the core because it was so *very* good looking. Here was Cole's midget car, only as long as a 1936 Chevrolet coach, and it was fantastic! Lower than a lot of sports cars, broader and more stable looking than any sedan in the world. It wasn't really *attractive*, not with that gray linoleum interior, but the potential was there. Unhappily, the orthodox Ford Falcon came with bright-colored interiors and outsold the Corvair on that alone. Of course, the Falcon wasn't hurt at all by its superior gas mileage and its ability to keep its fanbelt in place for days at a time, something that eluded the Corvair.

But over in the nebulous corner that the marketing men/accountants had assigned them, the car enthusiasts were excited. The Corvair bristled with interesting technical features, even if they were atrociously executed. An aluminum engine! What if it did weigh seven pounds more than the cast iron Falcon engine? Independent suspension! So it was twitchy as hell, and nearly uncontrollable with alarm clock type stem-winding steering, so what? It was a conceptual breakthrough! Next thing you knew, there'd be a Corvette version, and the American Porsche would be a reality.

And it started to happen. The Monza, a specially-trimmed show car built for the 1960 New York show, went into production and suddenly reversed the fortunes of the Corvair. It was an instant hit, and sales zoomed.

So did the Corvair accident rate, but no one seemed to notice. At least no one who counted—maybe a fledgling lawyer up in Connecticut, but who bothered with people like that? But by 1963, a great many people knew that the Corvair was, in fact, what G.M. had claimed the Tucker to be; an improperly, if seductively, engineered car. There were five types intended for retail sales: the original sedan, as good-looking as ever; a pleasant hardtop coupe; a sleek convertible that seemed to be pure sports car; a sort of super-VW bus, the Greenbriar (which also spawned two light truck types as well, a pickup and a van—inevi-

tably, "Corvan") and a superbly styled station wagon called the Lakewood.

The '64 cars were not quite so bad, but only if you were bright enough to specify the right options. A handling package cost nearly nothing, and quick-steering was available for those who worried about things like wild oversteer. But why did you have to specify? Why didn't G.M. build *all* the cars with decent steering? Why hadn't they done something about the swing-axle suspension long before?

Perhaps it was because they were busy working on the '65, a vastly better expression of the whole Corvair concept. Of course, the 1965 was bigger and fatter than the original (what "improved" U.S. design isn't?), but it had the desperately needed steering improvements and infinitely better rear suspension. There still was a lack of power, even in the turbocharged versions, particularly when the car was compared to the Mustang that preceded it by several vital months, but the 1965 Corvair was a *car*, something a seasoned driver could come to love, and something a novice could appreciate immediately.

If the truth be known, I hated Corvairs when the '65s appeared, so much that I didn't bother to try one. Who needs another badly-balanced, ill-conceived car with no power? My mistake. And, I suspect, the mistake of a lot of others. Certainly sales were not as good as they should have been, which undoubtedly was due in a large part to the Mustang, a car that cost only a bit more, and went a lot faster, if the road was smooth. And just when the secret success was achieved, along came Nader's book.

I like Ralph Nader, and I liked his book. He said a lot of tough things that needed to be said, and he saved a lot of lives—a fact his critics seem to ignore with as much ease as he ignored Chevrolet's genuine improvements to the Corvair. He knew the car had been changed, he even used drawings from *Car Life* to illustrate his point about how bad the '64 had been. But there was no muckracker's case in being fair to G.M., so he wasn't. Any more than they were fair later on when they were using muscle to intimidate him and hired girls to tempt him. (When G.M. was mad at *me*, they only used muscle, alas...)

The grey men made their great mistake at that point. They should have pushed the Corvair like mad, pressing a vigorous advertising campaign to sell the car on its own merits. Presumably someone at G.M. felt that such a course would imply fault in the earlier designs, so they chose the insipid "I love my Corvair" sticker campaign instead. And, fatalistically, stopped all development of the car. By 1967, when sales were well down, these same crepe-hangers had become so out of touch with the market that Chevrolet withdrew the two most powerful engines in the line and left enthusiast drivers with no more than 110 hp. A far wiser course would have been to stuff

in the belt-driven overhead cam 3-liter engine they had built for the Monza GT show car (the best such show car G.M. has ever done, I think), and sell the Corvair head-to-head with the Mustang. In 1968, after a quixotic letter writing campaign, the best concession G.M. would allow itself to make to a forlorn enthusiast market was to drop the 4-door sedan while reinstating the 140-hp engine.

Look at the potential they threw away: The Corvair had superb visibility. They could have used the visibility checklist presented in the back of Nader's book as a sales tool to fight Mustang. The Corvair was the best-handling car on the U.S. market, bar none. Oh, sure the Corvette would go around a smooth corner faster, as will the current Z/28 Camaro, but get out on the back roads anywhere in the U.S. and I'm convinced a Corvair will outrun anything. The Corvair was the most comfortable car in the sporty class—it should have had far better seats and controls, and sold at a higher price, but G.M. kept thinking of it as a "compact," as an "economy" car, and never understood what the Corvair's real potential was.

Inevitably a forceful decision was made. G.M. decided to forget the Corvair. When *C/D* tried to get a Corvair for trial this past April, it wasn't possible. No G.M. public relations office in the country could make one available. I finally turned up a '69 coupe in Los Angeles, just two days before the termination announcement. An indication of G.M.'s affection for the beast was its presentation: The car was dirty, mud-streaked and grimy. They gave me the keys and a buck and a half in change, saying that I could go get it washed if I wanted... *sic transit*...

I needn't have bothered. Except for a few bits of padding, it was identical to the '67 I had driven previously... and just as nice. Have you driven one of these cars? Do you know what they've really done to us by taking this machine away? Do you appreciate how seductive the '65-'69 car really was? Have you *ever* driven an American car with *pleasant* manual steering? With *powerful* non-servo brakes? With soft suspension and side bite?

Try it. Get a Corvair. Drive it. Drive it hard. And join me in thinking bitter thoughts about those grey men who defeated the best car we've been able to buy from our friendly neighborhood American car store. Join me in thinking about what the Corvair might have been if DeLorean and Duntov had been allowed to make a '70 model. Drive one and understand why the price of used Corvairs has soared. The curio collectors be damned, it was people who understood cars who drove the price up the week after production stopped.

*Stopped*. Because no one had courage enough to defend an idea that didn't spring full-grown, from the trunk of a Cadillac Seventy-five.

It's a shame that not even the polluted waters of Lake Erie can conceal. ●