

Ralph Nader Radio Hour
50th Anniversary of 'Unsafe At Any Speed'

[Audio Starts]

Announcer: From the KPFK Studios in Southern California, it's the Ralph Nader Radio Hour.

Steve Skrovan: Welcome to the Ralph Nader Radio Hour, my name is Steve Skrovan along with co-host, David Feldman. Hello there, David.

David Feldman: Hello there.

Steve Skrovan: And the man of the hour, Ralph Nader. How are you today, Ralph?

Ralph Nader: Very good. Ready to go.

Steve Skrovan: Okay. No nonsense. We're going to get right to it. And I'm glad we're going to get right to it because we have a special show for you today, special because this coming November 30th is the 50th anniversary of the publication of Ralph's groundbreaking book, Unsafe at Any Speed, which was published back in 1965. David, we wish Ralph a happy anniversary.

David Feldman: Did you get the flowers?

Ralph Nader: No, I don't need the roses. I need more cars recalled that need to be fixed.

Steve Skrovan: We'll work on that. And here's one way we're going to work on that. On today's show, we are going to celebrate that important piece of work which Time Magazine named one of the top 100 influential non-fiction books of all time. We're going to talk about its birth, its history, and how its publication marked the beginning of the modern consumer movement.

Now I know, Ralph, you were not a fan in nostalgia, so we are only looking back as a way to inform the future. And here's how we're going to do it. I've selected a number of clips from the documentary that Henriette Mantel and I directed, entitled An Unreasonable Man. That's you, Ralph. I'm sure you know that.

Ralph Nader: (chuckle) Yes.

Steve Skrovan: For those of you not familiar with the film, the title is inspired by a quotation from George Bernard Shaw. I looked up that pronunciation by the way. A lot of people say Bernard. This is Bernard. And it goes like this. "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one insists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

So what we're going to do is play a number of clips from the movie that helps tell the story about how Unsafe at Any Speed came about, and about why such a relatively technical book on a fairly unsexy topic made such a big splash. And then we'll talk about each clip. The first clip is a short one that starts up with a bang, rather crash, a car crash. The first voice you will hear will

be a 32-year-old Ralph Nader at a Senate hearing. The next voice you will hear will be David Bollier who was a guest on this show last year talking about our nation's commons. And he is also something of a consumer movement historian. So, roll that clip, Jimmy.

Ralph Nader: *Two perish in the cab of burning truck; two Wisconsin couples die in car collision in North Dakota, 15 children orphaned; Texas collision takes five lives; crash kills six on Chicago Highway, and on and on through the daily newspapers.*

David Bollier: *Ralph decided that auto safety was of interest to him when some friends of his had been victimized by unsafe cars.*

Ralph Nader: *Frederick Condon was a Harvard law school classmate of mine, and at age 28, with a wife and four children, he was driving home from work in New Hampshire one evening, and the car rolled. There were no seat belts in those days. He was half in, half out in the roll and became a paraplegic.*

David Bollier: *And on his own, as a freelance journalist, Ralph wrote an article for the Nation Magazine in 1959 about the designed-in dangers of automobiles, a totally novel topic at the time.*

Steve Skrovan: Now Ralph, you wrote that article in the Nation and you came to the attention of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was working at the Labor Department I believe.

Ralph Nader: Yes.

Steve Skrovan: Tell us a little bit about him and how he got in contact with you. And this kind of started a bit of this ball rolling, right?

Ralph Nader: Yes. He always had an interest in traffic safety before he went to the policy planning section of the Department of Labor under Secretary Willard Wirtz. This is during the Kennedy-Johnson years. And he called me up, and he said -- this is before the article in the Nation actually -- we'd been in touch with one another. And he said, "Why don't you come down and work on a report on the federal role in traffic safety?" Under his department, he had jurisdiction over the federal employees who were in cars and some of them would be in crashes and some of them would die and be injured. So there was a subtopic of the overall traffic safety issue nationally to look into. And I did go down there and I did work on it for a number of months, interviewed people in Congress and also other departments and produced the report.

Steve Skrovan: Now, I actually have the title of that report. And I don't know if you remember the title, Ralph. It's called Context, Condition and Recommended Direction of Federal Activity in 7 Highway Safety. I got to tell you, it sounds like a blockbuster title to me, a real page-turner.

Ralph Nader: Well, the interesting about traffic safety before I got into it was it was the fourth leading cause of death in America. The first leading cause of death for youngsters from five to twenty-five; and it was then studied as an engineering subject, as an academic subject, as an economic subject in universities, in colleges at all. It was like off the radar. It was, "Oh well, you know, whatever will be will be, it's accidental. It's not much you can do about the nut behind the wheel." And there was no emphasis on the vehicle designed in construction, therefore no emphasis on getting seatbelts, airbags, side protection, rollover protection, head restraints, padded dash panels, better door locks. And of course, there was no attention on better brakes, tires or handling.

At the time, there was no advanced degree at any engineering school in America in auto safety engineering. You know, this is the biggest engineering infrastructure in the country, right?

Steve Skrovan: Right.

Ralph Nader: The driver-vehicle-road system. And there was no PhD in automotive engineering. You have to go to Europe to get a PhD in automotive engineering. And the importance of that is that the engineering schools were pretty much subdued by the auto companies' graduates from MIT, Caltech, elsewhere who went into the auto industry. They didn't fund research at these engineering schools.

And as a result, the auto company is pretty much got engineering graduates from civil engineering, mechanical engineering. And as one article in the GM Engineering Journal pointed out, "We get them from these engineering schools, and we teach them the industry way." The industry way meant subordinating engineering integrity to stylistic pornography. They didn't quite put it that way, but basically the styling sections of these auto companies were sprawling, well-funded operations. The safety sections were in the corner.

David Feldman: Ralph, are you saying that back in the late '50s or early '60s Germany, France, and Great Britain were ahead of America on auto safety?

Ralph Nader: Not on crashworthy, with one exceptional I'll point out; but they were definitely ahead with radial tires. They were ahead with disc brakes. We didn't have those. They were -- Mercedes for example was ahead without using the term in crashworthiness but the real leader was Volvo.

Volvo in 1960s decided that it was important to offer seatbelts, three-point seatbelts, not just lap belt, to all Volvo owners. And they began to study the results and there was a dramatic reduction in fatalities per hundred million vehicle miles. And when I brought the results from Volvo to the public dialogue and to Congressional hearings, I would taunt the auto companies in Detroit and say, "Well, what's Detroit's excuse?" Because in those days, you won't believe this, David and Steve.

In those days, I would go to engineering safety conferences that were sponsored in the name of the Air Force colonel who did crash testing on himself with Air Force safety programs -- I'll get to that in a minute, Colonel John Paul Stapp, who was an MD. And I would hear, you know, engineers for General Motors who clearly knew better but they were on corporate commercial self-censoring missions at these conferences. They would say that, "We can't put seatbelts in cars because the sudden collision and the driver would hurl forward and his internal organs would spill out, and he might lose the moorings for his kidneys or his livers." Sounds crazy but that's what the excuse was.

So I would taunt the auto companies and say, "Well, you know, I guess the auto companies have a different sense of the anatomy of the American motorists compared to the anatomy of the Swedish motorists. So, I think they ought to retain some physicians to explain the differential as to why Volvo thinks it's important to protect their customers in crashes but not General Motors, Ford, Chrysler or American Motors."

So, it was at that level, you see, that you had to get members of the Congress interested in it. And the comparative use of Volvo was really very, very important in those days because, you

know, Volvo was making money. It was selling cars, and it was selling safer cars. What about you, Detroit?

David Feldman: Did Madison Avenue pick up on this? Did Madison Avenue before you ever start selling auto safety to the American people?

Ralph Nader: Well, they were real culprits, because they would contrive these ads that were just mind-blowingly reckless. For example they would say, "When you get behind this 400 horsepower vehicle you'll have your own nuclear deterrent." Or here's another one, "When you get behind this 350 horsepower vehicle, you'll feel like a human thunderbolt." Like a human thunderbolt? I mean, that's really consoling and restraining of some of the teenage drivers on the highway.

And they were all hyping horsepower, style. They were spending millions of dollars redesigning grille patterns, so they looked more stylish or putting on hood ornaments, or fins. I would also taunt the auto people by saying, "Everything you do in the car is functional, right?" "Absolutely." "Well, could you tell me the function of the hood ornament? Could it be that you're trying to protect the vehicle from pedestrians?" I mean, there was piercings, killings of youngsters and adult pedestrians. It only took a few mile per hour collision. And also people walking even through parking lots and getting caught on hood ornaments and cutting themselves or getting caught on these sharp tail fins.

Some of the listeners may remember what the '59 Cadillac looked like. It had a three-pronged lurid tail fin on both sides that I described as similar to the tails of the Stegosaurus Dinosaur.

Steve Skrovan: Wow.

David Feldman: But there was no discussion about auto safety in the '40s, in the '30s, in the '20s that people didn't notice...

Steve Skrovan: Well, let me tell you, David. Let me tell you. This is a good leading to the next clip that question you're just asking now. So the discussion of auto safety, roll this next clip -- introduce this next clip and I think you'll get an answer to your question.

David Feldman: Okay. This next clip tells us a little bit about the auto companies' attitude towards safety. In addition to Ralph, we're going to hear from Henry Ford II and Ralph's longtime colleague in the auto safety wars, Joan Claybrook.

Announcer: *This must be an important announcement, because Henry Ford II is addressing the group.*

Henry Ford II: *We are Ford Motor Company.*

Joan Claybrook: *In the '50s, Ford Motor Company put a safety package on the road in 1955, '56.*

Henry Ford II: *I am most happy, therefore, to announce that all of the pioneer safety features and specifications and design...*

Joan Claybrook: It had a lap belt, a padded dashboard, a padded sun visor. These were all optional equipment. That safety was extremely popular. But then, General Motors got infuriated and called up Ford and said -- called Henry Ford -- and they said, "If you don't get rid of that

package, you know, we're going to undercut you and put you out of business." Henry Ford decided that they would drop the safety package. It wasn't that safety didn't sell. They couldn't supply enough safety belts for this. It was that the program had been cut off by the auto executives.

Ralph Nader: Behind it all was, they didn't want the federal regulators telling them how to build a car in terms of safety. And then they said, "If it's done in safety, it will be done in pollution control, and it will be done in fuel efficiency." And that's an easy sell in Detroit. That would cool off any engineer or business executive who wanted to continue selling psychosexual dreamboats.

David Feldman: Who came with the term psychosexual dreamboats?

Ralph Nader: I think I did, because I would read the ads, and they were really pretty lurid and, you know, they always had a beautiful young woman next to a car and a dealer when they're promoting these vehicles. It was a trivialization of an essential engineering system, the vehicle-highway-driver interaction. And they saw the way companies sold soap or toothpaste or cosmetics. It was the same kind of motivation to distract the motorists into trying to evaluate their car and their expectation level in terms of style, design, interior decor, shape of the vehicle and horsepower. And, of course, they distracted and lowered the expectation levels of motorists and didn't inform them. The pressure was off for the auto companies to reorder their priorities and build crashworthy, safe operational vehicles that were fuel efficient and reduced pollution.

And that was what I really zeroed in on because if you raise the expectation level of motorists, they can start thinking, "You know, Jesse didn't have to die in that crash. You know, my daughter didn't have to be crippled in that crash. You know, we really could have survived and had a great vacation, but we were injured in a 20 mile hour or 10 mile an hour collision, and we didn't have to be." That was the beginning and the end of the auto companies' subordination of safety engineering to stylistic trivia and marketing techniques.

David Feldman: But the point is is they had all of this technology. It wasn't like they haven't been developed. They were just sitting on it, right?

Ralph Nader: Yeah. They literally had -- virtually all of the technology we now take for granted in our cars. The first collapsible steering columns were patented before World War I. I would go to the US Patent office and dig up all these patents because it's the best way to go after the auto companies. I "hoisted them by their own petard" as the lawyers say. They were in their own patents, and they would say for example, "We want a patent on this collapsible steering column. Because in present cars in left side collisions, the existing steering column would ram back into the driver seat and kill the driver." Well, you couldn't have better evidence in that especially since it was 50 years later. And they didn't put in collapsible steering columns until the mid '60s.

And so they had all this. The seatbelts, I'd like to say, go back to World War I airplanes where they had seatbelts restraining pilots in their maneuvers. And going up and down fighting with German planes they had them restrained. They had them restrained for fighter pilots in World

War I, but they didn't restrain millions of drivers? The dash panel: the padded dash panel goes back to the ancient Roman chariots. "For heaven's sake," I would say to larger and larger audiences on radio and TV, "If the ancient Romans put padded dash panels on their chariots, isn't that enough lead time for General Motors?"

Steve Skrovan: (laughing) I think so. Ben Hur had this stuff.

Ralph Nader: Yeah. And as far as airbags, this was secret. They secretly tested airbags, Ford and General Motors at their proving grounds in the mid '50s, maybe early '50s. And then, they put the wraps on them. Because the whole theory of marketing by the auto companies -- and think of the tragedies, the hundreds of thousands of deaths and serious injuries every decade, people were dying at the rate of a thousand a week in the US and many more injuries and huge economic losses -- and the auto company marketing strategy was: "Well, we know that these are proven safety devices. Our engineers are pretty good at that. But the minute we start talking safety, people start thinking crashes. They start thinking bloodshed. They start thinking people in wheelchairs. And that's going to mess up the way we sell our psychosexual dreamboats."

David Feldman: There was no national highway safety bureau when you began riding on Unsafe At Any Speed. So how accurate were these numbers on the fatalities and injuries?

Ralph Nader: Well, they were pretty accurate, because the National Safety Council would put them out regularly. They'd predict how many would be killed in an upcoming Memorial weekend, Memorial Day weekend or Labor Day or Fourth of July. They were pretty accurate. The government had no role. The federal government had no role. The state governments, they had a few standards for brake fluids that were developed by the auto industries' captured automotive engineering society called the Society of Automotive Engineers.

There were no legal frameworks. It's like nanotechnology and biotech today. There were no legal or ethical frameworks for the auto industry, because the National Safety Council and other pawns of the industry, what I called in my book Unsafe at Any Speed, "the traffic safety establishment" wanted to blame the driver. I mean, they'd have quotes from tire and auto industry executives that would go like this. "As far as we know, the vehicle doesn't drive off on itself. It's the driver that puts the vehicle into motion. And when the motion ends up in a crash, it's the driver's fault. It's the nut behind the wheel."

So, I dug into human factors, engineering. I used the Air Force material that was sponsored by the Air Force. Because believe it or not, the Air Force was the first sponsored research into crashworthy vehicles at Cornell Medical School, Harvard School of Public Health and others. They spent about three to five million dollars in the early '60s, maybe late '50s. Why? Because their studies showed that more Air Force pilots were being killed on US highways than in the Korean War.

Steve Skrovan: Wow. Wow. Well, I'm going to name my next fantasy football team the Psychosexual Dreamboats.

David Feldman: I want to do a follow-up question. Were there any trial lawyers taking GM to court?

Ralph Nader: Yes, that was another source of my material. There were a hundred cases bought against General Motors for the early Corvairs by lawyers for either next of kin or people who were injured. And they did depositions, interrogatories, and slowly the material leaked out of the secret vaults of General Motors and got to my attention. So I used that. It's another example of the law of torts that the American Museum of Tort Law is trying to portray. A lot of that health and safety standards that the federal government, Food and Drug administration, EPA, the Occupational Safety Administration and of course the Traffic Safety Administration, NHTSA, they were stimulation by these lawsuits. They didn't have the courage to go out on their own and set federal standards. But, when the lawsuits divulge the damaging information, incriminating information, cover-ups, and very solid information, testimony under oath and all that, they begin to act. So, that was good.

But, you know, in the mid 1930s, the insurance companies began waking up to all the claims they had to pay. And they actually talked about a crashworthy car. They talked about cars and tried to give prizes to some of the better cars that were produced by the auto companies. But the auto companies squelched it. And they actually used the AAA clubs, which they help fund and they were on the board of directors, to take a dim view of what the insurance companies were trying to do. So, that was moment in time that was lost in the 1930s.

David Feldman: Did you get any assistance from corporate whistleblowers in finding these patents?

Ralph Nader: Not in finding the patents but in divulging ongoing defects on the assembly line with various model cars. And I would go to Detroit and meet some of these whistleblowers from the auto companies. We'd have to go around and round in a cab at the airport. They were really almost scared, I mean visibly scared. They would give me material in plain envelopes and make me pledge that I would never release their names -- very courageous people. But they told me in effect couldn't take their conscience to work. They couldn't take their skills to work. The assembly line could not be slowed down; and you lost your promotional opportunities, if not worse, if you tried to do that.

In those days there were no mandatory recalls. People were given defective cars, known to the auto companies, often known to the dealers, no requirement to recall the cars. This enraged me. I mean, I think my moral indignation did more to get me to do what I did and even what I knew about unsafely designed cars. I had lost friends in high school, in college. And when I hitchhiked all over the country, truck drivers knew me and picked me up. And we were often at the first scene of the crash before the emergency vehicles or police. And it was a greasily bloody scene, something you could never forget. Torn bodies, screams in silent, fires devouring the occupants.

And I began to notice certain things. And one thing I noticed was the way the steering column was jammed right into the driver's compartment and, you know, you don't survive that. And I began looking into all the research that was being done but suppressed in the US Patent Office. I

did a paper at Harvard Law School my third year, which I turned eventually into the book six years later Unsafe at Any Speed.

Steve Skrovan: Well, that's a good segue to the next clip. David, why don't you introduce this?

David Feldman: In this next clip, the first voice you'll hear is that of journalist James Ridgeway who has also been on the show talking about something completely different, the horrors of solitary confinement in our prisons. We'll also hear briefly from auto safety expert, Byron Bloch. And finally, we'll hear from the man who ultimately published Unsafe at Any Speed, the late Richard Grossman.

James Ridgeway: *I was working at the New Republic Magazine. And that was a time, I have to say, when the New Republic Magazine was sort of liberal.*

Byron Bloch: *I called up, and it just so happened that Jim Ridgeway answered.*

James Ridgeway: *And he always had, like, one of these stories about what was going on under the surface. They weren't conspiracy stories, but they were -- but they bordered on it.*

Ralph Nader: *He said, "I'm very busy. You got three minutes." I said, "Well, you know, I can it across in three minutes."*

James Ridgeway: *And, you know, his big thing was the car, the Corvair car.*

Ralph Nader: *The 1960 to '63 Corvair, which has some remarkable characteristics -- it's one of the few cars I know that can do the Bossa Nova on dry pavement and the Watusi on wet.*

Byron Bloch: *Ralph pointed out that with its swing axle rear suspension, and it's a rear engine vehicle, that a lot of times a person in a maneuver on the highway, the vehicle would tend to slide out or over-steer going around the curve. For example, it would tend to slide out and then it would trip and roll over. There were people that were being needlessly killed and paralyzed and burned in vehicle crashes.*

Richard Grossman: *I read an article in the New Republic by James Ridgeway, "The Corvair Tragedy." I felt so upset that this -- the possibility that automobile manufacturers were aware of design flaws that endangered passengers and still manufactured them.*

James Ridgeway: *This was not a popular subject, you know. This was before anybody was really interested in this stuff.*

Richard Grossman: *I said, "Jim, if half of what you wrote is true, it's a national outrage, and we must have a book." And Jim said, "Everything I wrote was true, but I'm not going to write any book for you or anybody else." And he said, "Besides which, anybody who writes about this subject leans on a guy in Washington, a lawyer named Ralph Nader. He knows more than any other ten people in the world about the whole area of automobile safety." He says, "But you'll*

have a tough time finding him." I finally got hold of the secret number of the boarding house on 19th Street, which I can still remember: Adams 41978. I'll never forget it.

Steve Skrovan: Ralph, talk a little bit about the publisher Richard Grossman. He was the last voice we heard in that clip.

Ralph Nader: Richard Grossman got out of the Navy in World War II and the first thing he asked himself was, "I want to find a mentor." And he chose Ralph Waldo Emerson. Remarkable, isn't it?

Steve Skrovan: Yeah.

Ralph Nader: And he ended up writing two books or so on Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as other books he wrote that were very compelling. Anyway, he started a small publishing house down in Lower Manhattan and it was actually a walk down into a basement office. It was very colorfully decorated, posters on the wall. This is in the disruptive 1960s, and I couldn't get a publisher for this book. I remember I sent a summary of the book and a couple of chapters to a man who was called the founder of the paperback revolution. I think it was Alfred Knopf. And he wrote back saying, "Well, it's an interesting subject but I think it would be mostly of interest to insurance agents."

But he (Grossman) caught it right away. I think the New Republic article really interested him in looking at the manuscript, and he said, "Of course, we're going to publish it." And when he did publish on November 30, 1965 within a couple of days the Science Magazine wrote it up and then the New York Times picked it up from Science Magazine and put it on the page one of the first edition of the New York Times.

I think within a day or two maybe a week, he got a telegram from General Motors saying they'd would like a dozen copies shipped by air mail to Detroit and would Grossman Publishing take a check from General Motors in the interim. And I remember Dick turned to me and said, "I think we can rely on the General Motors' check not bouncing."

Steve Skrovan: And he ended up publishing a lot of your early books afterwards too, right?

Ralph Nader: Oh, yeah, and including the Congress profiles, the profile of every member of Congress running for the election in 1972, never done before or since in American history. Publishers are very important. He also took me out to Detroit for press conference after Unsafe at Any Speed came out. It's one of the chilliest press conferences I've ever been at. The auto companies had their spotters there staring at me. The press, which was pretty much captured, skeptical press was disbelieving what I was saying.

But we prevailed and finally got good coverage. The Automotive News, the trade journal was excellent, spectacular example of a trade journal with integrity. Helen Khan, the Washington correspondent wrote article after article, 2000 words, 3000 words in weekly Automotive News during the whole congressional hearing process, which is very controversial. And I think maybe six reporters made all this happen: Pat Sloyan, subsequent Pulitzer Prize winner, United Press

International. Walter Rugaber, the New York Times correspondent in Detroit. Norman Miller for the Wall Street Journal in Detroit. And, of course, the great Morton Mintz of Washington Post, and a reporter for AP and a reporter for the Baltimore Sun. That's what you need.

The equation for success was getting committee chairs to hold hearings, who believed in the legislation to regulate the auto industry and upgrade the engineering integrity and safety of the auto industries' fuel efficiency and air pollution. And then you need reporters who would cover it as a daily beat which they really do now. They're looking for Pulitzer Prizes winning features. And you need the contact in the White House. And I made a good contact with Joe Califano, who was Chief of Staff for Lyndon Johnson. And that triumvirate did the job. In just nine months or so, Unsafe at Any Speed --

Steve Skrovan: Let's make it ahead of ourselves here, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Okay.

Steve Skrovan: I'm going to stop you right there.

Ralph Nader: Okay, go ahead.

Steve Skrovan: Because we're going to let the story play out for the people. We're only about halfway through. Let's introduce our next clip.

David Feldman: You're going too fast.

Ralph Nader: Okay.

David Feldman: It's unsafe. In addition to hear, again, from David Bollier, Joan Claybrook, and Richard Grossman, in this clip, you'll hear the familiar voice of Lawrence O'Donnell from MSNBC. And he wasn't around during that time, but when I was doing the movie, we interviewed him. And he was writing for the TV show, "The West Wing." And it turned out coincidentally; he also had been an aid to Daniel Patrick Moynihan. But that was in the '90s. Moynihan was a senator by then, and this is 30 years after Ralph had worked with him.

And to our benefit, O'Donnell was well aware of this history and did a great job articulating for us in the film how Americans feel about their cars. So let's roll that clip.

David Bollier: *He took that isolated accident, which was always blamed on the so-called nut behind the wheel and said that, "No, this is something that's preventable. We can design cars more safely." That hadn't occurred to anybody before.*

Joan Claybrook: *The nut behind the wheel is a myth, you know? What kills you in an auto crash is how the structure of the vehicle behaves, and yet they said the whole thing is how you drive, not that the steering wheel spears you, not that the, you know, the roof crushes in on your head. No, no, no, it's how you drive that's relevant. That's a myth.*

David Bollier: *People knew that automobile accidents had been occurring for decades. What they didn't know was that this was a systematic issue.*

Ralph Nader: *The engineers knew all along that they were--you know, that they were building junk. I'd fly to Detroit airport, and we'd circle the airport in an unlabeled motor vehicle while I was interviewing these whistleblowers, who I call the hidden patriots. And of course, they didn't want their names known, because they'd be fired by the auto company that employed them.*

Lawrence O'Donnell: *Here was someone saying, this vehicle that you think is the essence of your happiness, that the advertising community in Detroit has told you is everything you're ever going to need to be happy, is incredibly, recklessly dangerous.*

David Feldman: I know there are laws to protect government whistleblowers. Is it easier to find a corporate whistleblower these days?

Ralph Nader: Well, definitely easier than the old days. First of all, there are public interest law firms who will defend them like the Government Accountability Project known as GAP in Washington D.C. Second, there's a tradition in the economic fraud area, federal laws that give whistleblowers a bounty, a percentage of what their disclosures have recovered for the taxpayer, whether it's fraud on Pentagon contracts by the contractors or fraud on Medicare or Medicaid by the health insurance industry.

And so the whole idea of whistleblower which before we had our first whistleblowing conference in the early 1970s, whistleblowers were considered snitches, you know, unsavory, disloyal people. And now the status of whistleblowers, pointed out in Wall Street Journal recently, is becoming more of an ethical employee, an employee who can't stand the illegalities of his corporate employer or government employer and takes his or her conscience to work and wants to blow the whistle to protect people out there from being injured in greater numbers or killed or defrauded.

David Feldman: What happens if your corporate whistleblower, but you're blowing the wrong whistle? Could you then be fired?

Ralph Nader: Yes, you can be fired if you blow the right whistle too. It's no picnic. You can be ostracized forever from companies who don't like whistleblowers from ever being hired and so your skill is not marketable. Your family is under tremendous pressure. However, I think the media is more responsive now. There are some protective laws like if you blow the whistle on Dow Chemical for polluting a waterway illegally under the federal water pollution act then you can be protected if Dow Chemical goes after you. So you have the right to tell the truth and the fact.

So gradually these rights are going inside the corporation fed by our constitution. Even though the constitution stops at the corporate door, more and more rights of the whistleblowers in court cases, in the courtroom of public opinion, and some of these protective laws are carrying the day. That's an extremely important thing for consumers and workers, because when company bosses know that someone inside their company is going to blow the whistle and be protected or even get

a share of the returned unseemly gains, they're going to behave. I mean, this is a really important inside deterrent in these giant corporations. And it's an unfolding drama.

Steve Skrovan: In this clip, the entry begins. There's a cavalcade of characters in this one. And we're going to hear once again from publisher Richard Grossman and Jim Ridgeway. We'll also hear a voice that belongs to Justin Martin, a writer who wrote a biography of Ralph. The female voice belongs to Ralph's sister, Claire. And then we're going to hear from two Washington Post reporters. The first is Bryce Nelson, who was mistaken for Ralph in the capitol building; and the second is Morton Mintz, who Ralph just mentioned who ended up breaking an important story about Ralph in the Post. And Ralph's Harvard Law School classmate, Joe Page has a sound bite. Then the last two should be voices that the general public might recognize. But I won't confirm that until afterward. That's my way of being intriguing. Roll it, Jimmy.

Richard Grossman: *The issue about marketing that book always was, do people -- even if every word in it is true and everything about it is as outrageous as he says -- do people want to read about that?*

Justin Martin: *There was one particularly interested party, and this made all the difference.*

Richard Grossman: *Somebody once said to me, "Is Ralph paranoid?" And I said, "He's only paranoid because people are following him."*

David Bollier: *Ralph, being of a somewhat suspicious mind, quickly caught on that there were these coincidences and people accosting him, including a woman in the supermarket.*

Ralph Nader: *A young lady came up and said, "We're having a discussion on foreign affairs. Would you like to join us?" Well, you know, this is rather strange. You know, I mean, it's not like you're at some party, or you're in some classroom and someone says that. You're buying cookies, you know, from the cookie counter. I think she was interested in a domestic affair.*

James Ridgeway: *The same thing goes on here all the time. The only reason anybody investigates anybody, you know, outside of these congressional hearings, which now don't amount to anything, is to smear people. Following him around, usually trying to get him into sexual activity. It's to get him down.*

Justin Martin: *He started to get calls at wee hours, 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, and they would have strange covers. They'd say, you know, "This is Western Union calling. There's a package for you," that kind of thing. They'd also say threatening things like, you know, "Watch out, buddy boy."*

Claire Nader: *Mother was getting calls in -- 3:00-in-the-morning calls, saying, "Tell your son, you know, to shove off." There were threats.*

Bryce Nelson: *I was walking to the old Senate office building, underground corridors that they used and one of the capitol policemen said to me, "You'd better get out of here; there are a couple*

of detectives following you." And I said, "What you do mean?" "There are two guys following you." He said, "Didn't you write a book on auto safety?" I said, "No."

Morton Mintz: *It was February of '66, a Saturday afternoon, when Ralph Nader told me he'd been followed the previous day. Well, you can't write a story saying somebody says he's being followed when there's absolutely no evidence of it.*

Bryce Nelson: *I felt that I better tell somebody in case I wound face down in the Potomac or Anacostia rivers. I mean, something strange was going on, so I told my editor, the national editor of the Washington Post, Larry Stern.*

Morton Mintz: *And then Larry Stern, my boss, told me that another post reporter who has white skin and black hair had told him something very similar.*

Bryce Nelson: *Because we were so tall, thin, dark... dark hair.*

Morton Mintz: *I was, you know, astonished to have this confirmation.*

James Ridgeway: *The detective was following people along, making telephone calls and saying he was somebody or other.*

Justin Martin: *He went to Ralph Nader's friends and associates and pretended that he was -- that Ralph Nader had been offered a job. People began to wonder why if he was being offered a job were they so consumed with, you know, was he smoking pot, was he gay. They put it together and realized, yes, in fact, a person who's testifying before Congress has someone breathing down their neck, trying to figure out what's going on. They call some of the big auto companies; Ford says, "It's not us." Chrysler says, "It's not us." General Motors sort of -- you know, issues a statement where they indicate they don't know what's going on, but they don't demur.*

Joe Page: *I can remember getting a call in the wee hours of the morning from Ralph, and I said, "Well, what's the matter?" And he said, "It's GM."*

Phil Donahue: *General Motors sends sexy women into a supermarket to seduce him into a compromising position. I mean, I thought this was the damndest thing I'd ever heard in my life.*

Pat Buchanan: *After we heard that General Motors had turned the babes loose on him in the grocery, and we thought that was an unwise decision from a public relations standpoint for our greatest corporation.*

James Ridgeway: *I mean, General Motors was clearly, you know, pissed off, because, you know, they were going to face a lot of suits. I mean, there was a lot of serious stuff here.*

Steve Skrovan: *Okay, Ralph, the only thing I don't believe about that story is that you were buying cookies.*

Ralph Nader: (Laughs) I have a sweet tooth. It was obviously a come-on, I mean, no doubt about it. I was alert that things like that could happen because I'm a modest historian of corporate shenanigans and espionage and hiring private detectives, and so I was ready for it.

Steve Skrovan: And those last two voices you heard by the way were Phil Donahue and Pat Buchanan. For anybody who's playing our game at home. Go ahead, David.

David Feldman: Well, I wanted to ask about you Pat Buchanan in a second. But public relations notwithstanding, is it against the law for GM to spy on you?

Ralph Nader: Well, it depends how intrusive it is. Obviously, if they tried to go into my files without my knowledge or they trespass on property, offices whatever that is. Secondly, if they try to destroy your reputation that invokes a slander cause of action, libel suit. So there are certain boundaries. They can criticize me -- sharply. They can go on mass media. They can put rebuttals. They can even try to expose some personal background, which they tried to do. But the means they use can often come up against the legal barriers. And that's what we did. We sued them and got a settlement for \$425,000 from General Motors.

David Feldman: And how did you invest that money, Ralph?

Ralph Nader: Put it right back into starting a group that monitored General Motors, the auto industry and eventually any industry we thought was misbehaving, violating the law or harming consumers, workers, taxpayers, communities, you name it. I had great pleasure in turning General Motors' check into its own watchdog.

David Feldman: I have a question for Steve.

Steve Skrovan: Yes.

David Feldman: How many people do you know would take that settlement and not put it into a cash management account or buy stock with it? Seriously, I'm being serious.

Steve Skrovan: You know, Ralph probably is the only one or, you know, now maybe one of the people he has Johnny Appleseeded over the years. But my question is, you know, what does that say about the arrogance of General Motors? That they'd think they could -- they thought they could get away with this?

Ralph Nader: Because they got away with it in the past. They would -- like Ford, they would hire former FBI agents, who retired as part of their detective core. And they would go after critics. I remember in the depositions of the case we brought against General Motors, my lawyer was Stuart Spizer, who was a great aviation safety lawyer and a prolific author on legal subjects. He drew from General Motors the following episode. There was somebody in the early '60s in Harlem, in New York, who criticized GM because they did not have any African-American owned auto dealerships.

And what did GM do? They sent private detectives to get dirt on this guy. This is before they did it to me. So for GM, they played dirty, and they got away with it again and again and again. Anybody who stood up to them, who dissented in the company, outside the company was subject to their kind of pressure. This time, however, they tripped over a book called Unsafe at Any Speed, not by an engineer, but by a lawyer who knew a little bit about power and how to organize it against them from congress and down.

Steve Skrovan: What's amazing to me when I read the book in research for the movie is Corvair is just one chapter in the book, right?

Ralph Nader: That's right. I had a design behind the book. I had to indict the whole industry and it's all traditions and neglected priorities and pushing against mass transit, more highways, more cars, more trucks. But I wanted to get something that would pop up like flair. And so I picked General Motors and its car, the Corvair, which was on the road, over a million of them. So it was very much of a signal to the media that while they didn't want to get into the broader critique, "Hey, you've got a car on the road. You've got millions of people in it. And you've got General Motors, which advertises all over the country behind it." So, that was the reason for the first chapter to be on the Corvair.

Steve Skrovan: And you also had a chapter, I think, on pollution controls, which was also not a topic that was very popular at the time either. You had Rachel Carson's Silent Spring coming out, but you were bringing it down to the tailpipe.

Ralph Nader: That's right. "The Power to Pollute" is the title of the chapter in Unsafe at Any Speed. And I drew a lot on the Southern California Air Pollution Control District, which was run by some really great people. And, of course, there was serious air pollution inversions in smog in Los Angeles. I mean, it was very serious. And I drew on that, because I wanted to show the auto companies we're not only reckless in avoiding safety devices, but they were very reckless in their ability and power to decide what kind of air people were going to breathe to their detriment.

And that was another frontier that was opened up. So maybe some health specialists and public administrators were not particularly interested in auto safety, they would be interested in air pollution, lung respiratory diseases, for example, and property damage which pollution caused in the billions of dollars.

David Feldman: It's interesting. I've been living in Los Angeles for longer than I wish to remember, and I can remember the smog. And I can remember Republican friends saying to me, "Oh, Los Angeles, the Basin always had smog. The indigenous people used to burn leaves and trees. The smog has nothing to do with tailpipes." And Steve, when you're driving around Los Angeles, you can actually see mountains now.

Steve Skrovan: Yes.

David Feldman: They've actually cleaned – they've cleaned the air.

Steve Skrovan: Right. Exactly.

Ralph Nader: Many, many more vehicles now than before and the air is a lot cleaner. Listen, in the '60s, here's how bad it was, talk about Unreasonable Man. People adjusted to it as David just pointed out. They just took it. Well, that's the way the world is, you know. We got a big city. We got a lot of highways. We got to get from A to B and we've got to have motor vehicles. They didn't get informed about how they can have a lot more clean motor vehicles. So I once was watching a television station in LA and on came an ad which said this essentially, "Buy Murine, the cure for smog ridden eyes." So they actually, you know, they got sales off this thing.

Steve Skrovan: Right, right.

Ralph Nader: And that wasn't the only product as well. So the idea was the world was not required to adjust unreasonable men or women. The human beings had to adjust to GM and the other auto companies' world, using our air is their toxic sewer, and suppressing the engineering capabilities in their own company, who could have done otherwise.

David Feldman: I saw you on YouTube speaking about three years ago, and you gave validity to the claim that the auto industry and the oil industry and the tire industry collaborated to get rid of the trolleys in Los Angeles. I just thought that was something from "Roger Rabbit."

No, it's considered one of the greatest economic conspiracies in American history, and it's a matter of public record. What happened was, in the 1920s and '30s as the auto companies wiped out the horse and buggy business, their main challenger was the trolley cars, the electric trolley cars. So first, they tried to buy them out, and it was resisted. Then they went to the banks that provided credit for the trolley companies, tried to cut off the credit, and they didn't get that far.

So, then they tried a new tack. They connected with a tire company and an oil company and General Motors representing their respective industries and systematically started buying up these beleaguered trolley systems, starting with the biggest one in the world in Southern California and moving on to about 28 other metropolitan areas. And what they do when they bought them up? They ripped up the tracks, so that there'd be no competition, and people would have to buy cars to get around on the ground.

And so the Justice Department got wind of this; and in the old days, they meant business. They indicted General Motors, the tire company, the oil company for criminal violation of the federal antitrust laws in Chicago Federal District Court. And they got a guilty verdict. That's why I say it's a matter of public record. But, look at where they ended up. The judge fined General Motors \$5000. No one went to jail. The deed was done. The trollies were ripped up. And after all this record which was then incorporated in a great Senate committee antitrust report under Senator Philip Hart, all this record.

And the damage to this day, I mean you can attribute a lot of these clogged highways to the destruction of the trolley car industry in the 1930s and early 1940s. Today, you can attribute some of that congestion and pollution and gasoline wasted and temper tantrums and delay of time. You can attribute that to that conspiracy. And all GM was fined was \$5000.

David Feldman: Wow...

Steve Skrovan: Well, we're heading into the home stretch here, gentlemen. We've got one more clip, and we're getting towards the end of the show. So David, why don't you set this baby up.

David Feldman: In addition to a lot of the voices you've already heard, you're also going to hear Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Senator Abraham Ribicoff, President Lyndon Johnson, and a young Ralph Nader.

David Bollier: When this was confirmed that General Motors was responsible, the Senator Ribicoff from Connecticut, who headed the relevant senate committee in this area, went ballistic. The president of General Motors was summoned.

Justin Martin: You've got television cameras out there, and you've got a packed congressional hearing room. Everything's set up for maximum theater. You've got Bobby Kennedy there, Abraham Ribicoff. And then at a lower elevation, James Roche, CEO of General Motors.

James Roche: ...General Motors legal right to ascertain necessary facts preparatory to litigation.

Robert F. Kennedy: I don't see how you can know -- order the investigation, and then put out a statement like this, which is not accurate. That, Mr. Roche, disturbs me as much as the fact that you conducted the investigation and the way that it was conducted in the beginning.

Richard Grossman: It made a huge impact, because it was clear that there was something substantive here.

Abraham Ribicoff: Let us assume that you found something wrong with his sex life. What would that have to do with whether or not he was right or wrong on the Corvair?

James Roche: Nothing.

Abraham Ribicoff: What if you found out...

Richard Grossman: Ribicoff had a copy of the book on the table in front of him as he was questioning General Motors who said, "And so you hired detectives to try to get dirt on this young man to besmirch his character, because of statements he made about your unsafe automobiles..." and then he grabbed the book and threw it down on the table and said, "And you didn't find a damn thing."

Ralph Nader: I think the thing that has persuaded me to continue... and continue in this area is that I don't want to have a climate in this country where one has to have an ascetic existence and steely determinations in order to speak truthfully and candidly and critically of American industry.

James Roche: *I want to apologize here and now to the members of this subcommittee and Mr. Nader. I sincerely hope that these apologies will be accepted.*

Morton Mintz: *When the chairman of a big corporation admits something like that and apologizes, boy, that's big news for everybody.*

Justin Martin: *It launched Ralph Nader into instant national prominence.*

Joan Claybrook: *And it intersects with the auto safety bill. The hearing on Ralph being followed by General Motors was in March of 1966 and the bill's through the Senate in May. It was just amazing.*

President Lyndon Johnson: *Will somehow be able to build in more safety without building on more costs.*

Ralph Nader: *If you get things out in the open, you'll get some action. There's no place for secrecy anywhere in traffic safety.*

Morton Mintz: *It's the record of the press. They don't pay attention to all kinds of serious issues until there's some kind of spark. I've often said I thought that if that GM detective, who had tailed him had spotted him in a Safeway with his hand on a girl's fanny, that would have been the end. He wouldn't have -- the issue would not have taken off.*

Steve Skrovan: Ralph, that last voice we heard was Morton Mintz about how the issue wouldn't have taken off. Was Morton Mintz right?

Ralph Nader: Well, I think partly right. I think the media was fascinated with the detective capers, and what they're trying to do, which includes seducing me. And that sort of was a come-on for some of the media that didn't know much about the substance of the struggle for auto safety. But never underestimate the power of Congressional committee, because if the media didn't want to go after it on their own, the auto companies – because they had so many advertisements by the auto companies, they could cover a Congressional hearing going after the auto companies and basically have deniability: say to the media, you know, “It's not us, it's Senator Ribicoff, it's Senator Magnuson, Senator Nelson, Senator Mondale.” And that really was the turning point. I think that was the most critical aspect, that it was a sustained hearing. It wasn't a one day flash job by a committee. It was a sustained hearing. I was a voluntary consultant to them and that was some of the Congress's finest moments. I don't know why they don't reverberate today to their finest moments. I don't know why the media doesn't reverberate today to *their* finest moments. But, it wasn't that we built on the '60s, unfortunately. We look back on the '60s as the finest moments.

Steve Skrovan: Well, we only have a couple minutes left here to kind of sum up. And, Ralph, we have a lot of authors on this show, who are doing great work. Do you think we are in or at least approaching a moment in history where books like Unsafe at Any Speed or Silent Spring or Jane Jacobs who wrote about cities – The Death and Life of the American City or The Feminine

Mystique, which launched the modern feminist movement? Do you think we're in a time of history where books like this can change things like those did -- even in the age of YouTube?

Ralph Nader: Well, unfortunately, we are in the golden age of muckraking books, exposé, articles even in some of the mainstream media like the New York Times and the Washington Post and even the Wall Street Journal. Even though we are in the golden age of documentary films that expose injustice, abuses, damage, destruction, avoidable deaths and injury, corruption, they're having less and less impact. And I suppose there are a lot of explanations on that. One of them is the overload of information, another is the distraction of the smartphone, and text messages, and Facebook accounts.

I think another one is the counter attack by the giant corporations. They become bigger, smarter, more lobbyists, more money into both parties campaigns, more reshaping of the media. I mean, they're buying the media now. CBS isn't just CBS anymore. It's a conglomerate-owned CBS and the same with NBC. So I think we're faced with a big turnaround opportunity. We've never had so much information about bad things going on in the country. We've never had more solutions on the shelf for the problems we don't deserve on the ground. But, we've got to connect all this with a civic resurgence of citizens, citizen groups, more hearings, more lawsuits, more demands to recover Congress from the grip of Wall Street. We've got to just have a new wave of democracy.

And that's what I hope this 50th anniversary of Unsafe at Any Speed will unleash in the coming year with signal events that not only mobilize people, but start new civic institutions, new energies for the next generation. And we hope to fill Constitution Hall, the most symbolic building in America for a new wave of structural, functional democracy to replace the plutocratic oligarchs that have hijacked our country and are strip mining it into the ground.

Steve Skrovan: Well, that's our show. To order your hard cover commemorative copy of Unsafe at Any Speed autographed by Ralph, go to nader.org.

David Feldman: Not only will you get an historic book, your \$100 will help The Center for the Study of Responsive Law, the organization that Ralph founded to make corporations and our government more accountable. Go to nader.org to get your copy.

Steve Skrovan: Well, I just wanted to say in behalf of all us, thanks, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: It is a great privilege; believe me, to live in a country where you could do something like this. And we want to keep it that way for the next generations to come.

[Audio Ends]