

Steering a Path Between Risks and Benefits to Life

By JOHN MUELLER

Suppose an engineering firm came up tomorrow with an amazing new form of transportation. People would step inside a booth, dial a location and then be taken apart atom by atom and transmitted over wires to the desired location where they would be reassembled—a la "Star Trek." After thorough safety tests, the firm has concluded that almost all trips would be utterly without incident—one could easily emerge from a lifetime of use without a scratch. Unfortunately, in a tiny percentage, things would go wrong and the traveler would never re-materialize. Injuries, from minor contusions to blinding and paralysis, would also occasionally occur. The total: probably no more than 50,000 deaths a year and two million or so disabling injuries—concentrated, for some odd reason, not among the weak and infirm, but among young adults. There would also be considerable death and illness because of atmospheric pollution. Should we install a system with such costs?

We have, of course. It's known as the private passenger automobile and it is one of the greatest devices for mass destruction ever invented. We often say there is nothing more important than the value of human life—indeed, a code of ethics for engineers requires them to hold the safety of the public paramount. Yet, obviously, we don't really believe this; getting around in cars is far more important than human life—we willingly sacrifice 50,000 lives a year for the privilege.

In some respects, war, an important rival to the automobile as an invented method for slaughter, is surrounded by less hypocrisy. People who plan and conduct wars know lives will be lost, and they often forthrightly, if grimly, build these considerations into their calculations: They estimate how many casualties it will take to capture an objective and consider whether the objective is worth it. The auto-

mobile, by contrast, is far less frequently put in that framework; the obvious is too rarely asked: Is having the automobile worth the cost?

It may seem strange to put war and the automobile in the same class, but the moral distinction between them may not be as great as it seems.

For example, war might seem worse because the probability of being killed in a war is higher than in a car crash. This distinction is not terribly useful, because it is quite possible to have wars in which the chance of being killed is very low. Indeed, the probabilities are often within hailing distance: By one calculation, driving a car and being in the Army in Vietnam reduced an American's life expectancy on the same order of magnitude. (Actually, in big wars there may be an eerie relation between the two phenomena: World War II probably "saved" more than 50,000 American lives by reducing traffic deaths through gasoline rationing and because so many dangerous drivers were drafted.)

Another popular distinction between war and the automobile stresses that the automobile system is voluntary—no one is forced to drive around in a car—while wars use conscription. But many armies rely entirely on volunteers, while some 15% to 20% of those killed in traffic are pedestrians, and it is scarcely realistic to suggest anyone has a choice about whether to be a pedestrian.

War is most often seen to be morally inferior to other forms of destruction because death is part of its very intent. By contrast, no one intends anyone to be killed by cars. The distinction is important and it accounts, along with the low probability of injury in a single trip, for the benign acceptance of the automobile. But suppose there existed two ways to spend \$10 billion: one would prevent a war that would kill 1,000 people (by intent), the other would prevent 20,000 accidental deaths. Would it

be sensible to prefer the former?

Furthermore, it is a bit disingenuous to suggest that the deaths and injuries automobiles cause are entirely unintentional. Unlike most diseases, they happen because, as a society, we have systematically chosen to encourage the automobile over less dangerous means of transportation. Reducing the speed limit for private passenger automobiles to 10 miles per hour would, if enforced, save at least 500,000 lives by the end of the century; to oppose such a law is willingly to pay this price to get there faster by automobile. But if we are willing to pay this cost, we should also explicitly acknowledge it. To do less is utterly irrational. But irrationality where human life is concerned seems commonplace—witness the naive assertion in the engineers' code that human life is more important than anything else.

The purpose here, of course, is not to argue that wars are good and automobiles bad, but to suggest that both should be subjected to the same sort of cost-benefit analysis. One might well conclude that few wars have been worth their cost, while 50,000 lives a year is a small price to pay for the blessings of the automobile—the pleasure, the convenience, the personal mobility, the economic benefit, the aesthetic charm, the macho gratification.

Many other social policies involve the same sort of consideration. An extreme example: Every year a few thousand people die falling from buildings more than one story high. Those lives could be saved by closing off all buildings at the second floor. To reject this is to say tall buildings are worth that cost in lives. As a society, we regularly and inescapably adopt policies in which human lives are part of the price, yet often we casually and opaquely gloss over the full cost consequences.

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