WHY CRASH TESTS HAVE AUTO MAKERS LOOKING TO 2017

Unless the Obama auto-mileage rules are rolled back, all cars will be small cars.
In the strange world created by the government's highly irrational policies toward the auto
industry, car makers got some good news-bad news this week. Their new minicars were found to
be sadly lagging on safety by an independent testing lab.
Among the teensy euro-style cars flying off the assembly lines, only the Chevy Spark rated
"acceptable" by the vaunted Insurance Institute for Highway Safety in a common type "front
overlap" crash at 40 miles an hour. Ten others, including the Fiat 500 and Toyota Prius C, were
rated "poor" or "marginal."
This bad news, which has been all over TV the past few days, is good news for an industry
gearing up for the lobbying fight of its life—the 2017 "mid-term review" of President Obama's
strict new fuel-economy rules. The review was the key concession ceded to auto makers when
the White House had the industry by the throat in 2009.
Economists puzzle over the matter in a world of yo-yoing gas prices and advancing technology,
but let's just say a back-of-the-envelope estimate is that the 40-year-old fuel-economy regime
known as CAFE, or corporate average fuel economy, has never secured any real benefit for the
United States. Consider: The mileage targets went unchanged from 1990 to 2009 and yet the
U.S. light-vehicle contribution to global greenhouse emissions fell from a negligible 3.3% to an
even more negligible 2.6% for reasons beyond Washington's control.
But one thing is certain: However much government agencies keep insisting lighter cars don't
have to be smaller and more dangerous cars, vehicles would get a lot smaller under the Obama
out-year targets. In 2013, the average vehicle tipped the scales at 4,041 lbs. By 2025, the average
vehicle would hardly be heftier than today's 2,500-pound minicars—about 2,976 lbs., according
to an MIT study.
The Chevrolet Spark during a crash test. The Spark is the only minicar tested to earn an
acceptable rating in the small overlap front test. Associated Press
Voters may not care about auto-industry profits, but they do care about safety and comfort. Auto
makers make a near-riskless bet that Washington will rein in the rules before they really bite. In
the 1990s and 2000s, pols carved out the SUV loophole to keep auto makers and car buyers
happy. Only one big question lingers, on which millions in lobbying fees will be spent, and that's
the exact form Washington's climb-down will take.
Indeed, CAFE shows how terrible government policy, like ladies of the night and oversized oil
paintings, can become respectable with age. The Bush White House once routinely criticized the
rules in its annual economic report. When President Bush got in trouble in Iraq, he seized on
higher mileage targets as a kind of recognizable currency to show that his only approach to a
messy Mideast wasn't to send in the troops.
President Obama, for his part, routinely blames Detroit's focus on selling big cars for its financial
meltdown. This is complete nonsense, of course. Big cars earn all of Detroit's profits. But Mr.
Obama is borrowing the logic of cognitive linguist George Lakoff, who teaches Democrats to
say what voters want to hear. And liberals and environmentalists want to hear that Detroit's
bankruptcy was punishment for SUVs.
As a House GOP investigation would later find, the current target of 54.5 miles-per-gallon target
in 2025 was picked by Team Obama because it made an impressive-sounding "headline
number." Decimals apparently indicate seriousness. In reality, the rules are full of fudge factor to
favor the electric cars Mr. Obama likes to talk about and Detroit's pickup truck business. A more
realistic indication would be about 47 mpg in 2025, though that's still far more fuel economy than car buyers would likely find worth paying for at any gas price below $7.

Which brings us to the small cars that fared so badly in the front overlap tests, including the 2014 Ford Fiesta.

Ford was louder than most in predicting that Americans would become more like Europeans, willing to hand over top dollar for teensy cars with luxurious touches. But Europeans pay $9 and $10 for gas. Plus, even as they get fatter and older like Americans, Europeans spend fewer hours behind the wheel, which makes a lack of full-size comfort easier to accept.

In the U.S., gasoline is about $3.28. At this week's Detroit auto show, Ford was talking up not its minicars but its full-size pickup and a forthcoming 155-mph Mustang.

But then fraudulence in all things is not the worst practical slogan for anybody practicing politics. We don't exaggerate when saying all auto makers are focused on 2017. Hard to find is an executive who believes the rules will survive as written. Get ready for one of the great regulatory scrums. Not only will car makers send lobbyist hordes to shape the successor rules to their own advantage, but to the disadvantage of their rivals.