

Is Chevrolet's Corvair dangerous? "...at any speed"

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It's been over 50 years since the last Chevrolet Corvair rolled off the GM Chevrolet assembly line, but the myth that Chevrolet Corvairs were unsafe continues to circulate.

This is despite the fact that by 1972, Chevrolet's Corvair was independently proven to be as safe or safer than any other car of the period. This false reputation for being unsafe was pure nonsense and completely unwarranted. Here's the background:

The first generation Chevrolet Corvair was produced from late 1959 and ran until mid-1964. It shared a rear suspension design that during this time was also used in Porsches, Renault Dauphines and Volkswagen Beetles of the period.

During high-speed cornering, all of these early rear engine cars displayed the same extreme camber angle changes that are associated with Chevrolet's first generation Corvair, but of course nobody ever suggests the Porsche, Volkswagen or Renault were dangerous cars.

It's important to understand that Ralph Nader's well-known book "Unsafe at any Speed" was critical of all rear engine cars including the well regarded Porsche. Ralph Nader only mentions the Chevrolet Corvair once, as an example, in the first chapter of his book and Nader used the Corvair simply because it was more visible on American roads. Ralph Nader's criticism was of all rear engine cars, regardless of the brand name.

During the early 1960s, before Japanese cars had become mainstream,



Volkswagen almost had the Australian small car market to itself. VW beetles were sold in record numbers and many were owned by young, inexperienced drivers. Not surprisingly, this combination resulted in a high percentage of serious road accidents involving the humble VW Beetle. The car itself did not cause the accident, the combination of an inexperienced driver and quite possibly incorrect tyre pressures were very likely the primary causes.

The humble VW beetle had:

- (1) An unrestrained swing-arm rear suspension
- (2) Required 15 lb front and 26 lb rear tyre pressures

Failure to maintain correct tyre pressures in 2023 is still the most overlooked item by car owners today, but these facts were never considered with respect to rear engine VWs or Porsches. The early 911 Porsche had questionable handling but of course Porsches sales never reached the numbers of VW or Chevrolet Corvair.

While considerable evidence exists that proves beyond any question, that the

Chevrolet Corvair was indeed safe, the most compelling and totally independent evidence comes from the U.S. Department of Transportation.

It's well documented that in 1971, the U.S. Department of Transport tested an example of the original Corvair by comparing it against directly competitive cars. The outcome was that the Corvair was "not especially dangerous". This independent determination that Corvairs were indeed safe vehicles attracted little attention, as by 1971 Chevrolet's conventional front engine Camaro had replaced the Corvair, so it was a little too late.

The development of the second generation 1965-69 Chevrolet Corvair commenced in late 1961 and even today is highly regarded for its re-designed rear suspension, styling, handling and engineering. This exceptional re-style was not forced on GM by Ralph Nader as some believe. It was at least 4 years after GM had finalised its 1965 Corvair specifications that Ralph Nader published his book titled 'Unsafe at any Speed'.

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Dangerous?...

GM had completed work on the second generation Corvair design long before Ralph Nader published his book. Accordingly, Nader's book did not, in anyway, influence Chevrolet's 1965 redesign. There is no basis to suggest otherwise.

The major reason why Chevrolet killed off the Corvair was Ford's unquestionable financial success with its 1964 Mustang. These first Mustangs amounted to an attractive pillarless coupe body being bolted on to quite agricultural Ford Falcon underpinnings. They were cheap to build and most importantly kept Ford shareholders happy by producing record profits!

Ford's success with the Mustang, almost certainly convinced Chevrolet to dress its Chevy II in a sporty pillarless coupe body and call it a Camaro. These conventional water cooled front engine coupes were far cheaper to build than the Corvair, and this fact more than anything else put the final nail in the

coffin for the Chevrolet Corvair.

Bottom line: Chevrolet Corvairs were proven to be safe cars.

Direct quotes;

- "1972 Texas A&M University safety commission report for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration which found that the 1960–1963 Corvair possessed no greater potential for loss of control in extreme situations than its contemporaries." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chevrolet_Corvair#cite_note-04)

- "Ralph Nader's accusations were proven false by the 1972 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration safety commission report. Support for the tests, conducted at College Station, Texas, was provided by the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) Texas A&M University Research Foundation. The investigation concluded:

- "The 1960–1963 Corvair understeers in the same manner as conventional passenger cars up to about 0.4 g lateral acceleration, makes a transition from understeer, through neutral steer, to oversteer in a range from about 0.4 g to 0.5 g lateral acceleration. This transition does not result in the abnormal potential for loss of control. The limited accident data available indicates that the rollover rate of the 1960–1963 Corvair is comparable to other light domestic cars. The 1960–1963 Corvair compared favorably with the other contemporary vehicles used in the NHTSA Input Response Tests. The handling and stability performance of the 1960–1963 Corvair does not result in an abnormal potential for loss of control or rollover and it is at least as good as the performance of some contemporary vehicles both foreign and domestic." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chevrolet_Corvair#cite_note-NHTSA-36)

Vair Photos...



Here is Brodie standing next to his soon to be on the road Corvair convertible. What a nice looking car!

