

Article courtesy of Autos Cheat Sheet, May 09, 2016

The Corvair: The Misunderstood, Revolutionary Chevy

By [James Derek Sapienza](#)



In the 47 years since the last one rolled off the line, [the Chevrolet Corvair](#) still has a reputation. Even the most casual gearhead knows about it: the air-cool, rear-engined, *weird* Chevy. The big failure, the black-eye for America's favorite brand, the deathtrap! *Unsafe at Any Speed!* The car that was so dangerous, so horrible, it single-handedly launched Ralph Nader's crusade against the entire industry, and brought the wrath of the federal government crashing down upon the American automobile. "Sure," you might be thinking, "I know *all* about the Corvair."

But chances are, you don't. Because the Corvair myth is largely that: a myth. In reality, it was the right car at the wrong time: a groundbreaking model that could've set Detroit on a completely different path had it caught on, which it almost did. Besides, at the end of the

day, it wasn't Nader that did it in, it was something much closer to home. Half a century on, the Corvair is still the biggest gamble General Motors ever took on a single car, and for that alone, it deserves its due.

Until the mid-'60s, the mantra for automotive safety began and ended with this: Don't crash your car. Bullet-shaped steering hubs, knife-edged steering fins, and temperamental bias-ply tires weren't a problem as long as you were a good driver that kept up with maintenance, checked your tire pressure, kept alert on the road, and felt confident that you could get the thing home after a few drinks. Detroit made cars for good drivers; bad drivers were the ones who got into crashes, and adding "safety features" to a car implied that you may be the one in a crash. Why would you need those? You aren't a bad driver, are you? So while Detroit's general idea of safety hadn't changed much since Ford decided to add rear brakes to the Model A (the Blue Oval even had the gall to try pushing seat belts on their '55 models — customers *hated* them), the Big Three had become aware of a new phenomenon creeping into the market: imports. They seemed to be seeping in from the top and bottom of the market: funny looking rear-engined offerings from companies called Renault and Volkswagen were wooing budget-

minded buyers at the low end, and the country club set was beginning to pay attention to cars from Mercedes-Benz and Jaguar. World War II was over, hundreds of thousands of Americans had been overseas, and jet travel had suddenly made the world feel a lot smaller.

By the mid '50s, it said something to be “Continental,” and have a bit of old world flair. Studebaker sold its Raymond

Loewy-designed cars on their “[long, low, European lines](#),” the Chevy Corvette and [Ford Thunderbird](#) were designed to take on luxury grand tourers from

England, and Lincoln even named its Rolls-Royce-fighting coupe the Continental. It may have been decades before the Big Three really felt the pressure from foreign makes, but the smart guys in Detroit — and General Motors brass in particular — were shrewd enough to realize these Europeans were onto something. They just thought they could do it better.

In 1956, Ed Cole had been promoted to chief engineer of the Chevrolet division, largely because of his spearheading the development of the Corvette and the wildly successful “[Tri-Five](#)” Chevys. Cole could see that these rear-engined, air-cooled compacts from Europe were onto something, and the economic recession of 1957-'58 showed the beginnings of a demand for affordable, [compact cars](#). As demand for them stayed

strong, overall auto sales dropped nearly 50%.

Cole had been interested in an air-cooled rear-engined, rear-wheel drive compact car since at least 1955, but the old guard at General Motors had long been resistant to a compact, and would likely blanch at something so revolutionary. After taking the reins at



Chevy, Cole continued to work on the project covertly, working with engineers from GM's European Opel and Australian Holden divisions as cover. The recession changed some important minds at GM however, and by 1958, Cole's running prototype (badged as a Holden) got the green light for production as a 1960 model.



Dubbed the Corvair (a name taken from a 1954 Corvette fastback show car), Chevy's revolutionary compact was released to positive press on October 2, 1959. Starting at just over \$2,000 (around \$16K today), it was the cheapest Chevy available, and radically different from the competition's new for '60 subcompact offerings: the Ford Falcon and Chrysler's Valiant sub-brand. With an open, airy cabin, frontal trunk and fold-down rear seat (standard on coupes, optional on sedans), great handling for the era, great fuel economy (and estimated 20–25 miles per gallon), and an industry first air-cooled flat-six engine (beating Porsche by several years), the Corvair was a lot more car than Volkswagen and Renault could offer.

But buyer response wasn't as expected; Americans were

flocking to the more traditional, slightly cheaper Falcon over the radical Chevy. As a response, Cole ordered a crash program to field a more conventional compact (it would become the 1962 Chevy II Nova), and scrambled to reposition the Corvair in the Chevy lineup. Just three months into production, the Corvair was in trouble.

Even in Chevy's moment of panic, the Corvair wasn't exactly a failure. It won Motor Trend's

1960 [Car of the Year](#) award, first year sales were a respectable 250,000 cars, and by February 1960, Chevy had introduced the model that would redeem the Corvair: the Monza.

Available at dealerships in May, the Monza featured bucket seats, a four speed manual transmission, a tuned engine putting out 95 horsepower, and a long options list allowing buyers to personalize their cars. By 1961, over 50% of Corvairs were sold with the \$189 Monza package, and Chevrolet was



selling over 330,000 of its rear-engined cars in '61 and '62.

In April 1962, the groundbreaking Corvair became the first production car to offer a turbocharged engine. While it was a \$300 option, it cranked out 150 horsepower and 210 pound-feet of torque — an impressive figure for a relatively small engine. With its low center of gravity, great traction, and power, the turbocharged Corvair was beginning to get a reputation as something of a budget performance car. But it was also beginning to get a reputation for the wrong reasons too. The Monza coupe may have been popular with gearheads, but the Corvair was also available as a sedan, station wagon (the Lakewood), van (the Greenbriar), and pickup truck (Greenbriar Loadside). And with uneven weight distribution (36 front/64 rear), owners pushing their Corvairs a little too hard were introduced to a uniquely un-American driving problem: snap oversteer. Driven around corners in anger, the rear end of the Corvair could cut loose, causing the outside rear wheel to “tuck under,” and break the car into a spin. This tendency, coupled with Detroit’s emphasis (or lack thereof) on safety made for a deadly combination.

The Corvair was supposed to come equipped with an anti-roll bar, but last-minute cost-cutting measures meant it was deleted just before production. As a stop-gap, Chevy advised dealers and buyers to fill the front tires to 15 psi, and the back with 26. This worked fine, until

the unsuspecting good driver pulled into a gas station and told the attendant to fill 'em up. By 1964, Chevy had addressed the problem by adding the front anti-roll bar and revising rear suspension, but by then, the damage had already been done.

In 1965, the Corvair got a substantial redesign, with flowing, sensuous lines



usually reserved for cars four times its price. Car and Driver’s David E. Davis [waxed poetic about the car](#) in its October 1964 issue, saying:

And it is here too, that we have to go on record and say that the Corvair is – in our opinion – the most important new car of the entire crop of '65 models, and the most beautiful car to appear in this country since before World War II.

He may have been right about its beauty, but history would ultimately prove him wrong. In April 1964, Ford introduced the Mustang, a sporty compact based on the Falcon that blatantly copied the Corvair Monza’s



sporty pretensions and mile-long options list. It cost about as much as the Chevy, was available with a V8, and would sell over 1 million units within two years. With the Chevy II fighting the Falcon, and the Corvair no match for the Mustang, Chevy began developing its own ponycar. The Camaro would be ready by late 1966, and the Corvair would be largely irrelevant in the Chevy lineup.

While the Mustang was changing the automotive landscape in 1965, Chevy sold over 230,000 new Corvairs. Then the bottom dropped out. In the fall of '65, The Nation published "The Corvair Story," the first chapter of Harvard-educated attorney Ralph Nader's scathing critique of the American automotive industry, *Unsafe at Any Speed*. In the book, the chapter is called "The Sporty Corvair-The One-Car Accident," and was based on an interview with George Caramagna, a Chevy engineer who warned of the dangers of removing the anti-roll bar back in '59. As the rest of the book goes on to describe the dangers of everything from interior brightwork, confusing gear

selectors, Detroit's indifference to safety (who knew there were so many bad drivers out there?), and what happens to the human body in a car crash, it painted a grotesque and ghoulish picture of the state of the automotive industry.

As Unsafe at Any Speed became the

unlikely best-seller of 1966, Chevy tried to bury the Corvair in its lineup. Plenty of other cars had the same problems as the early Corvairs, and a number of other cars are excoriated in the book, but with it in such a prominent place in Nader's book, the car became a symbol of everything that was wrong with the industry.

In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson created the Department of Transportation to enforce safety standards on American roads, mandating features like collapsible



steering columns, seat belts, and side-marker lights be standardized on all cars sold in the U.S. after 1968. The industry was changing fast, and the Corvair was sales poison. Sales fell to 30,000 in 1967, then 15,000 in '68. In 1969, the Corvair was unceremoniously axed in May, after finding just 6,000 buyers.

But was this sea change in public perception the Corvair's fault, or was it a convenient whipping boy? In 1972, the newly-created National Highway Safety and Traffic Administration tested a 1963 model against contemporary rivals like the Ford Falcon and Plymouth Valiant and found it to be no less safe than its rivals, largely vindicating the car. But the damage had already been done, and GM had long abandoned its cutting edge compact fighter.

The irony here is that by the early '70s, the ponycar boom that damaged the Corvair was largely over thanks to safety and emissions standards, with millions of Americans flocking to affordable imports — the very cars the Corvair was designed to compete with. By the end of the decade, Detroit was losing ground as Japanese brands invaded the market, and by end of the 1980s, GM's market share was a shadow of what it was when the Corvair debuted in '59.

Today, the Corvair is a [cult car](#) with a growing following. Parts and aftermarket support have always been strong, and at a time when well-optioned early Mustangs can fetch six-figures at auction, you

can still find a clean driving Corvair for under \$10K (this blue example, a 1969 Monza with *just 15 miles on the clock*, [fetched \\$29K](#) through Mecum Auctions in 2014). And with the price of early long-nose Porsche 911s going through the roof, sporty Monza and Corsa models offer spirited '60s-era flat-six driving at a fraction of a price.

Imagine a world where the Corvair outsold the Falcon, and the Monza spurred Ford to build an air-cooled competitor. Would 20-plus miles per gallon have become the norm by the 1973 oil crisis? Would we have had a world of air-cooled flat-six performance cars to take on the Porsche 911? Hell, would turbocharging have taken off a decade earlier? Today, the Corvair is an evolutionary dead end on the American automotive family tree, but it sure is a tantalizing what-if. Nader's exposé on the automotive industry ultimately did more harm than good, and we can't imagine the world without the Mustang, but we'd love to get a glimpse of a world where GM's biggest gamble paid off.

