

LOS ANGELES

Daily Journal

WEDNESDAY,
JUNE 18, 2008

— SINCE 1888 —

OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER OF THE LOS ANGELES SUPERIOR COURT AND UNITED STATES SOUTHERN DISTRICT COURT

Forum

RIP, SUV: Lawyers Should Lead by Example With Car Choices

By Timothy D. Reuben

I read with satisfaction in the news that Hummer production is being halted. We have apparently reached the end of the SUV era — unless those SUVs are hybrids getting over 30 miles per gallon. That is because what we always knew would happen — oil running out and pollution ruining our world — is actually occurring, just as expected.

What is pathetic is that the SUV craze ever happened. It was, of course, fueled by us baby boomers — aging hippies and flower children and their younger brothers and sisters of the '70s — all of whom really compose the “me” generation, which has continued well past the '80s. Self-indulgence has been our creed, and we have wasted resources, drank oil and its products, and fouled our world. Sometimes we have done a few things to assuage our consciences, to make us feel like we were not completely focused on our images and comfort — like giving to charity (and taking that tax deduction), or a little recycling! But mostly we have been consuming.

I am part of this foolish generation. Years ago, when I was in high school, I undertook a special independent study about ecology and read the then current books that warned about global warming and depleting resources and encouraged clean, renewable energy. My first time in Los Angeles as a teenager was back in 1970 on Earth Day, and everyone I met was environmentally focused. I remember participating in an urban planning session where we took into account greenhouse gases and declining oil supply. There were no Hummers in our session.

When I came to L.A., started practicing law and married and had children, I still had the knowledge that oil was someday going to run out. But I bought a Toyota Land Cruiser for my wife, which got about 8 mpg, because she wanted to look less like a housewife when she dropped off our kids at school. A succession of SUVs followed — everyone wanted to look hipper. Almost nobody used them to go off-roading in the African bush or even in the nearby Mojave Desert — usually it was to go to the grocery store, or drive to work by ourselves. Most of the SUVs did

not hold any more passengers than a typical station wagon, but they got about half the gas mileage. I recall a movie called “The Player” where Tim Robbins, playing a very clever and successful entertainment-type, drove a Range Rover — very cool. People everywhere were into the SUV craze. And the auto industry, in partnership with the oil industry, turned out other image cars that generally got lousy gas mileage — Jaguars and BMWs and Mercedes and Lincolns and Cadillacs. These were the favorite cars of lawyers who needed to keep up their image. Didn't Susan Dey drive a BMW in “L.A. Law”? A lot of legislators and congressmen also bought big, gas-guzzling cars. And the geniuses in our federal government also arranged for a tax break for the biggest offenders — vehicles over 2,000 pounds. Recently, in “Evan Almighty,” the main character, played by Steve Carell, drove a Hummer. One might think Noah would have been environmentally sensitive. I guess that was part of the joke.

Dependence on oil is the single most powerful negative influence in the United States today. It controls our energy policy, dogs our economy, dominates our foreign policy agenda and generally screws up our lives. Would we have invaded Kuwait or Iraq but for our dependence on oil? Would our economy now be in such a mess but for \$5-a-gallon gas prices? All goods are transported, and we rely almost solely on gasoline to do that. And will technology be able to solve the global warming crisis largely caused by our continuous energy consumption? We have known that oil was running out, that the Ozone layer was deteriorating and that the Middle East was not a place we wanted to be dependent on since I was a kid. And we knew it was going to burden the lives of our children if we didn't act. And we bought SUVs because we were selfish and spoiled.

So I am finally getting religion. I am turning in my SUV and leasing a Prius. It's something. I will miss my SUV; it was fun sometimes. But I have to get used to having less and setting a better example. I also put solar panels on my roof. I don't understand why some solar panels aren't required throughout



California on all new construction — oh, that's right — the California Legislature eliminated tax breaks for solar panels in the 1990s, thereby decimating that fledgling industry at the time. We should require those solar panels in a big way and write them into the Building Code. And Arnold, you need to give up your Hummer if you haven't already. I am just a lawyer, and we lawyers should set examples. But Arnold, you have real international power and influence. You could do something to make up for your, my and all our generation's unnecessary, irresponsible excesses. Even Leonardo DiCaprio, a young whippersnapper to you, has been a leader in changing to a hybrid. Our kids are going to have to pay for our self-indulgence.

As one Bar leader wrote: “Apologies are all right, but positive action to correct the problems are what is necessary. It is up to you, the individual attorney, to make the appropriate changes in your actions — make the actions positive rather than negative — to effect a better public relations image.”

And we in the legal community need to lead by our positive actions.

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