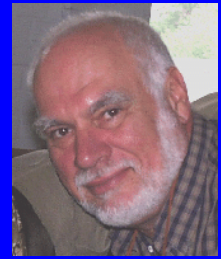


## SUV NATION—MINE'S BIGGER

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"I love my SUV," has become the slogan of hundreds of thousands of US Americans, to which many add, "I feel safe in it" And "It lets me get above it all."

### ***The SUV Enigma***

The rise of the SUV in less than decade (currently over 22 million on the road) has been one of the outstanding enigmas of US culture. Enigma, because the reasons for owning a SUV fly in the face of proven wisdom and research about transportation on the road. The evidence:

- *SUVs are unsafe.* Accident statistics assembled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Association prove that SUVs, far from being safer vehicles, are responsible for more deaths of their drivers and others involved in their accidents than minivans, standard cars, and even compacts and sports cars. Essentially they replace visibility, maneuverability and driving skill with harder-to-control size and mass. SUVs are four times more likely than cars to roll over in an accident and three times more likely to kill the occupants in a rollover.
- *SUVs are an ecological disaster.* After years of effort to minimize pollution and gas guzzling, we have opted for the most wasteful form of personal transportation available, SUVs spew out 43% more global-warming pollution and 47% more pollutants than an average car. According to Sierra Club research, switching from an average car to the average SUV for a year wastes more energy than if you...
  - Left the refrigerator door open for 6 years
  - Left the bathroom light burning for 30 years, or
  - Left your color television turned on for 28 years
- *SUVs are overkill.* Purportedly designed for off-road effectiveness, most SUVs never leave the highway except when they miss the driveway and slice up a corner of the neighbor's lawn. Most of the time they simply contribute their useless features to the rush hour jam and their touted rigidity contributes to early arthritis as we bounce over potholes.
- *SUVs give you less for your money.* Even in a time of uncertain economy, owners are willing to put out many more coins for the purchase and service one of these behemoths than they would pay for far more, drivable, comfortable and parkable transportation. We take pride in the pain of feeding our monsters in the face of the worst oil crisis and highest gas prices since the 1970's.

So, okay, you own a SUV and are becoming ticked off with what I have had to say so far. You have already begun to suspect that I am a disgruntled schizoid who owns a Porsche 911 that he rarely drives, rides a bicycle to the grocery, and takes the bus to town. You are right on all counts. But my aim here is not to get you to torch your SUV—though it would make a safer

world for pedal pushers like myself—but to get you to examine the mindset that has created the “SUV Nation,” a mental paradigm that (like the vehicles it produces) is affecting the entire world.

### ***Touring the SUV mentality***

Fasten your seat belts, because we are going to navigate the tight curves of the US mindset. Where are we headed? I'll let you in on it at the outset. *Down this road we will discover that the mental paradigm that created the SUV Nation is the same mental paradigm that George Bush uses to justify four more years in the White House.* A shorter name for our destination might also be: *Bigger is just bigger and it costs more.* So now (especially if you are both a Democrat and a SUV owner), you may be really pissed off at me, but I hope I have your attention and that you are curious enough to read on. Stay buckled up, please. We just downshifted into second gear and four-wheel drive to navigate a bumpy neural pathway.

Have you ever noticed that fear gives you goose bumps and make the hair stand up on the back of your neck? Or, maybe you have seen your dog or cat get its fur up when alarmed or cornered. Why? Nature gives many of its creatures the ability to make themselves look bigger when threatened or afraid. Fear puffs up your pet so it looks too big to be swallowed by the beastie stalking it. This is true even if, newspaper in hand, you are the beastie trying to keep the hair-shedding culprit off the couch, though you never intend to turn your pet into dinner.

Zoologists say this reaction arises in the reptilian and limbic brain—neurology that we have in common with lizards and beasts of the field. Looking too big to swallow may end an animal face-off by discouraging the aggressor so the weaker can high tail it to its cave or burrow. Or, it may turn into a fur-flying fight to the death.

When it comes to humans, the friction of clothing, shaving, and depilatories have removed most traces of this natural defense. What recourse does the naked human have? How does the 21<sup>st</sup> century metrosexual or even good ol' boy compensate for the paucity of chest and back hair or his balding crest? Where can the female of the species find a substitute for a howling, hirsute alpha protector? Is there an all-in-one solution that looks like it fits our needs for both flight and fight when we are scared?

Ah, yes, there is. An SUV, of course. Two of them in fact. One in the garage to make us look big on the highway, and one in the White House to puff us up in front of our enemies. BIG is their common strategy. Let's look at how it works.

When threatened, our first reaction is to fight—if the odds are in our favor. When not or when the uncertainty and fear reach a certain level, we run. We cocoon, hide out, build walls and gate our communities. On the public highway, we take refuge in our Jimmy, Explorer or paramilitary Hummer. This is a natural instinct, our limbic reaction to threat. Flight tends to be safer than fight in most situations.

But, interestingly, once cuddled in our secure nest, hunkered down in our SUV or nestled in daddy's arms, it is not a big step to feeling invulnerable and turning again from flight to fight. “My daddy can whup your daddy,” “Mine's bigger,” and “God's on our side” re-arm our morale. The problem with fight and flight is that they are both lizard-level programs. When they are in running, they keep our more highly developed human level applications from coming into play. We are deliberately operating in DOS when we could be working in virtual reality.

### ***The Downside to Limbic Living***

Automatic animal survival reactions are a first, but not always the best line of defense. Complex human confrontations are usually not resolved by flight or fight but tend to be

aggravated by these responses. When endangered, we want easy and quick solutions instead of well thought out strategies. Living with each other on planet earth becomes every day more dangerous the more personal and political choices we make on the lizard level.

When social forces, terrorism, economic failure seem too big for us, the limbic response is: we need to look bigger to feel safer. Bigger than our friends as well as our enemies. When frightened we frequently lose perspective of who is for us and who against. Friends who see things in a different or perspective are unwelcome and may start to look like enemies as well.

Looking more macho or more protected are rudimentary male and female instincts that each of us has to measure in ourselves and deal with. The problem with bigger is that it sets off a race among the fearful—bigger stick, bigger wall, bigger car, bigger military, bigger budget, bigger bomb, bigger, bigger, bigger BANG! It is time to realize that bigger is just bigger. Also, it usually costs a lot more and produces lots less.

North Korea is a good example of the costs of trying to look too big to swallow. The USA, of course, has trillions more to spend before it can get to the same impoverished state that Kim Chong-il now enjoys, but we have made a good start at panic spending since 9/11. The escalation of military spending was a key factor in bringing an end to the Soviet Empire. It can do the same for the US Empire.

Terrorists, by the way, understand this very well. Our fear of what damage they can do will lead us ultimately to do more damage to our spirit and our economy than they can possibly carry off in a sustained way. A credible threat of nuclear terrorism is just as effective as a real one; perhaps more so since it keeps us consuming resources to look bigger and more invulnerable, whereas a real nuclear blast is likely to unleash an Armageddon in which everybody loses.

This strategy works well. Whether we are talking about the phony protection of a 4x4 or a political leader pretending to make the country and the world better and safer and freer, SUV thinking is the most expensive response and least likely to produce lasting results. What *big* does produce is individualistic and unilateral bluster, along with resource-guzzling habits and policies. We buy into an overpriced, oversized and underperforming military vehicle to convey our message. We invite deadly rollover on the highway at home and more roadside car bombs abroad. **In short, it requires the same forms of faith and denial to pursue current foreign policy as it does to buy, feed and groom an SUV.**

***Are We Talking Culture or Politics? Probably both.***

Before you conclude that this is a not-at-all veiled political propaganda piece begging for domestic regime change, remember that the objective of this opinion piece is to explore the cultural roots of violence in US society wherever that may lead. Culture consists of patterns in which a group of people think and act for survival and success. Cultures collapse when a group's thinking turns into runaway trains of thought.

If you look at key US cultural values, high on the list are *self-confidence* and *taking control of one's environment*. Their opposites are *fear* and *being out of control*. These predate the current administration and 9/11 by a long shot, but the severe economic, political and military crises of the last several years, have raised the nation's fears for survival and fed the inclination on the part of many to look for a *duce* or a *Führer*, *caudillo* or strongman. These same factors also raise the temptation of politicians to take on roles that we would in more normal times quickly recognize as incompatible with our democracy.

Playing the 9/11 tune on a 24/7 basis as the current administration has done, particularly in its re-election campaign, whatever their post election intentions may be, is well designed to keep you in the pseudo safety of your political SUV as well as "protected" by the truck chassis of your 4x4 in case of terrorist attack. They might as well simply adapt SUV spots on TV. There is not just a similar public relations plan here; there is real SUV collusion, too, since President Bush's economic stimulus plan now offers a \$100,000 tax credit for business owners who purchase any vehicle weighing 6,000 pounds or more when fully loaded. "One hand washes the other," as they say in Cosa Nostra.

Fear and panic lead us to do things that may work for lizards and housecats but not for human security and global policy. SUV thinking is one of these patterns, cultural Viagra for the faint of heart. As USians, though we may personally feel small and defenseless, we already look too big and consume too much for most people in our world to stomach. It tempts them to want to bring us down or at least cut us down to size. SUV bluster on the road or in the White House may yield a sense of security and a feeling of potency or even omnipotence, but in fact what it does is waste enormous amounts of national resources, isolates us from others and raises prices at the pump.

Attention SUV Nation! It's trade-in time.