

Are You Politically Correct?

The Global Warmer vs. the Ultra-Green Machine

By Thomas Ryll

I love stereotypes. The funniest line I've ever seen in a car magazine is one I haven't had nearly enough opportunities to repeat: "More useful than a set of jumper cables at a Puerto Rican wedding." As it turns out, the only person I have known to need jumper cables at a wedding is me. It wasn't so many years ago that I drove to a buddy's wedding in Seattle in a VW with a bad battery. I stashed the jumper cables in the trunk, just in case. What luck: There was a hill to park on. And not a Puerto Rican in sight, just an employed white guy who was too cheap to buy a new battery.

After 17 years of test-driving new cars, I've either fabricated, confirmed or debunked all the usual stereotypes about automobile ownership. And debunking is usually the most fun. Now that we're in the thick of election season, with all its microscopic analysis of political beliefs, what I'd most like to do is expose people who confound stereotypes about what we're supposed to drive.

My friend and colleague Ken is someone you would call an environmentalist, and his wife works for an fish-protection advocacy group. True to their beliefs, they drive environmentally responsible cars, one of them being a Honda Civic. But when a family member from Ken's home state of Wyoming offered up a hand-me-down 1987 Chevrolet Suburban with 240,000 rust-inducing miles on its odometer, Ken couldn't resist. First he had to wrestle with the implications of driving a vehicle that's a poster pig for the anti-SUV set.

Better to simply fess up: He calls it the Global Warmer. Besides, "Everybody owns a Suburban in Wyoming," he says wryly. "That's the only car that will stay on the road in a 60 mph crosswind." He figures the thing is worth \$531-\$530 of that being its new tires. The \$1 is what he paid his sister for the privilege of becoming what likely will be the Global Warmer's last owner.

On the other side of the equation, my brother and sister-in-law are prototypical right-aisle Republicans, immersed in conservative-Christian church activities and home-schooling their kids until they entered Christian private schools. But when Peggy went shopping for a car a year ago, she really wanted Toyota's hybrid Prius, a car that's greener than God's own garden. That earlier model wasn't quite big enough or powerful enough for her needs, but she was genuinely interested.

The guy who owns the store where I buy my chain saws—which, like most outdoor equipment, are notorious air polluters—bought a Prius. "It's not about saving the planet or anything," he told me. "I just got tired of 15 miles per gallon from my Ford Explorer." Just as gasoline spiked to \$2.50 a gallon, he took delivery of car that goes 50 miles on four quarts. That calls for high-octane smugness, like opening a chain-saw store on the day after a hurricane.

Sometimes the deviations from political car-rectness are more subtle. I was delighted a while back when it dawned on me that another colleague, a dedicated vegetarian since

she was a young teenager, has leather seats in her Mazda Miata. It was like catching a teacher driving 80 mph in a school zone. "So, you won't eat cows, but it's OK to sew them into upholstery?" I asked, smug as a Prius owner when gas is \$2.50. "What can I say?" she said. "I know that is inconsistent. I just don't believe in eating animals." I have yet to ask her if, in a perfect vegetarian world, cows:

- (1) become extinct;
- (2) are kept only as house pets;
- (3) are raised only so they could donate their hides to the world's automobiles, sofas and shoes. We wouldn't eat them, of course. Heh.

Enough typing; time for stereotyping. I have no idea what sort of cars that BushCheneyKerryEdwards drive.

Cheney is from Wyoming, of course, so if my buddy Ken is right, a Suburban is called for, maybe with a license plate that says EFF YOU. Bush, as a Big Oil man, needs an equally thirsty vehicle, so long as it's bigger than Cheney's. EFF ME? might be cute for a Bush.

As for Kerry, he shouldn't be driving, Dems being such fans of mass transportation and all. Edwards, successful trial lawyer that he is, can drive anything he has collected in lieu of client fees, with a license plate that says SUE YOU.

But the truth is, I don't care what they drive. I have my political preferences, and I'll be casting a ballot in the fall, but I am fed up with all the politicking of Election 2004. The feature I most want in my next car is the one that recognizes political ads or stump speeches or OPB fund-raising broadcasts and automatically shuts off the radio. I don't want to hear about weapons of mass destruction; I want to go in search of weapons of mass distraction, like Mazda Miatas with cowhide seats. I'd even take a Global Warmer.