Driven to extremes: Fear of crime and the rise of the sport utility vehicle in the United States

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Abstract
During the mid-1980s, the sport utility vehicle (SUV) emerged as one of the most popular automobiles in the United States, a trend that continued throughout the 1990s. The SUV boom has attracted widespread coverage in the mainstream media but little scholarly attention. The following article examines the historical and social context of the SUV through analysis of popular press accounts, automotive reviews and trade news, and SUV print advertisements. Situating the SUV in the context of fear of crime and risk management during the 1980s and 1990s, it is suggested that the SUV’s popularity reflects American attitudes toward crime, random violence, and the importance of defended personal space. While consumer attraction to the SUV is typically attributed to two key features – safety and interior space – these pragmatic justifications may be viewed as euphemistic. Safety is not road safety but personal safety. Space is not interior cargo space but social space, including the privileged ability to traverse inhospitable terrain to remove oneself from society.

Key words
automobile; fear of crime; risk; security; space; sport utility vehicle

INTRODUCTION
During the early 1980s, a growing number of affluent Americans began to acquire four-wheel-drive passenger trucks as fashionable complements to their expensive import sedans. ‘Shiny four-wheel-drive vehicles’, noted one contemporary observer, ‘are now found hubcap to hubcap with Mercedes, BMWs, parked in the longest of Houston’s River Oaks driveways, outside the trendiest of Manhattan’s discos, and in lots of the glitziest Los Angeles restaurants. The Jeep, and its variants, are in’ (Kuntz, 1985: 226). These rugged off-road trucks – long the signature vehicle of soldiers, hunters, outdoorsmen,
and construction workers – stood in stark contrast to the svelte European cars that epitomized material success during the 1980s.

While those doing physical labor and recreating in inhospitable locations might require four-wheel drive and high clearance to traverse unpaved terrain, the new breed of four-wheel-drive sport truck owners would seldom, if ever, venture off road. Instead, such trucks lent ‘yuppies’ and wealthy suburbanites an aura of roughness that few could legitimately claim. Industry data confirm that the demographics supporting the trend are ‘upscale, active lifestyle-oriented, college-educated couples, aged 25–49, some with children, who don’t drive vehicles off-road’ (Bagot, 1989: 110). The sport utility vehicle (SUV), or sport ‘utes’ as they were also called, thus emerged as a new status symbol of the moneyed elite. As one industry reporter noted in 1994, ‘many sport-utility buyers are luxury-car buyers in disguise’ (Healey, 1994: 88). By the late 1990s, luxury car makers such as Mercedes, BMW, Infiniti, and Cadillac introduced their own versions of SUVs to counter slumping luxury car sales as affluent drivers traded in their sedans for SUVs (Eldridge, 1995: 3B).

The SUV boom has attracted widespread coverage in the mainstream media, including a recent backlash against SUVs due to their poor fuel economy. But with the exception of Keith Bradsher’s *High and Mighty* (2002), the only book-length study of SUVs, and a critical essay by Robin Andersen (2000), there has been little serious inquiry into the nature and peculiar American attraction to this strange vehicle. Americans are well known for their Bunyanesque swagger and penchant for the Texas-sized. It would be easy to simply dismiss the popularity of the SUV as another manifestation of gluttonous American appetites. Similarly, it could be argued – and usually is – that the SUV is desired above all for its practicality.

The new ‘Jeep chic’ was, and continues to be, largely attributed to two key utilitarian factors: safety and interior space. However, both of these justifications are easily disproved by empirical evidence. Strictly speaking, SUVs are neither more convenient nor safer than their minivan and station wagon counterparts. Consumer studies have repeatedly shown that SUVs are more prone than minivans or cars to rollovers and breaking failures, making SUVs less safe for their drivers and passengers (Bradsher, 2002). Between 2000 and 2002 alone almost 7000 people were killed in SUV rollers, and a recently released National Highway Traffic Safety Administration report reveals that SUV occupants are 11 per cent more likely to die in a traffic accident than those in cars (Hakim, 2004). Moreover, the height and weight differential between SUVs and cars puts the occupants of cars at a significant disadvantage. In the event of a side impact collision with an SUV, car occupants are 16 times more likely to die.

As for the interior space rationale, dealer specifications reveal that most mid-size SUVs have similar or less interior space than that of a minivan or station wagon. A comparison of the top-selling vehicles in each class for the year 2000 reflects this. The Ford Taurus station wagon has 81.3 cubic feet (2.3 cubic meters) of storage space, while a Dodge Caravan minivan has 146.2 cubic feet (4.1 cubic meters), and the Ford Explorer has 81.6 cubic feet (2.3 cubic meters). Though the Taurus station wagon and Explorer SUV have equivalent cargo space, they differ significantly in another category – average highway fuel economy – which is worth noting. The Taurus gets 27 miles per gallon (8.7 liters/100 km) while the Explorer gets 20 miles per gallon (11.8 liters/100 km).
In the absence of compelling practical explanation, then, the following cultural questions emerge: why did military ruggedness and off-road capability – rather than refined urbanity or daring speed or superior agility, for example – become prized automotive attributes during the 1980s? What does the desire to escape civilization in deep forests and rocky deserts suggest about social relationships? Existing explanations tend to be superficial and inadequate in that they do not probe very deeply into the cultural psychology of the SUV, particularly its association with conquest and retreat.

This following analysis situates the SUV in the context of fear of crime and risk management. It is suggested here that the popular obsessions with safety and space, as embodied in the SUV, are euphemistic. Safety is not road safety but personal safety, and space is not interior cargo space but social space, including the ability to traverse the most inhospitable terrain to sequester oneself from the hazards of modern civilization. In this way, the SUV’s popularity reflects underlying American attitudes toward crime, random violence, and the importance of defended personal space. The SUV is a large, intimidating vehicle that occupies high ground and is heavily fortified (see Figure 1). As an advertisement for the Land Rover Discovery notes: ‘Beneath the Discovery’s handsome exterior lies the heart of a 14th century English fortress’ (National Geographic, September 1995). Non-commercial drivers of SUVS are not simply egotistical or idealistic but also reactionary and pre-emptive.

This conceptual approach does not purport to offer a complete accounting for this complex phenomenon. At a symbolic level, the SUV may be viewed as embodying entrenched American ideas about rugged individualism, manifest destiny, and the

FIGURE 1 Cadillac Escalade in an affluent neighbourhood of Philadelphia, PA
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sublimity of nature. Andersen (2000), for example, suggests that SUV advertising transposes social anxieties onto the natural world, whereby the domination of the wild stands in for the desire to reclaim control over dangerous and insecure social environments. Alternatively, the popularity of the SUV may be linked to: 1) the valorization of work and the growing importance of individual versatility and tenacity in the emerging New Economy; and 2) ironically, the success of the environmental movement, which fostered a fresh desire among Americans to commune with the natural world through eco-tourism and extreme sports. Yet, as is posited below, the SUV’s dominant iconography – the desire for protection and retreat – reveals a striking correspondence to the cultural psychology of social fragmentation and growing economic disparity in late 20th-century America.

TERMS AND HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

There is currently no agreed upon definition of what constitutes an SUV. Built and often marketed as a hybrid of truck and car, the physical characteristics of the SUV are most easily identifiable in large truck-like versions but may become indistinct at the smaller, more car-like end of the spectrum. The following basic characteristics, derived from Bradsher (2002), provide useful criteria for identifying SUVs:

- They are four-wheel or all-wheel drive;
- They have a high ground clearance;
- They are built on the chassis or underbody of a pick-up truck;
- They include an enclosed rear passenger or cargo space.

The Chevrolet Suburban, built by General Motors and introduced in 1935, was arguably the first SUV to enter mass production. (The Suburban has been in continuous production longer than any other model of American car or truck.) The Suburban was basically an enclosed and upgraded pick-up truck designed for upscale passenger and light commercial use. A 1936 Chevrolet catalog, cited by Bradsher, portrays the Suburban as a practical, elegant conveyance for the affluent. Along with a photograph of a well-dressed woman exiting a Suburban with the aid of a chauffeur, the catalog copy reads: ‘Its utility is proved by its wide demand by private estates, country clubs, hotels, bus and transfer companies, airports, as well as operators who use it for business and pleasure’ (p. 5).

The Suburban was available in a two-door version only until the 1960s, making access to the back seats cumbersome and thus limiting its appeal as a family or passenger vehicle. However, the commercial version of the Suburban did become the standard vehicle for one industry, undertakers, who discovered that, with its rear seats removed, its interior dimensions perfectly accommodated bagged corpses and coffins (p. 5).

Despite the priority of the Suburban, the modern SUV is primarily a descendant of the US military jeep. The ‘jeep’ – derived from G.P., for general purpose vehicle – was conceived and designed during the early 1940s to meet the US Army’s need for a light, four-wheel-drive vehicle during the Second World War. The jeep’s success during the war
made this rugged, boxy vehicle a universally recognized emblem of American versatility and strength. ‘Few pieces of military equipment have enjoyed a cult popularity comparable to the Jeep’s’ (Walker, 1994: 18). After the war, the jeep was made available to civilians as surplus and in revised commercial models.

While the jeep is the main precursor of the SUV in the US, another vehicle, the Land Rover, represents a parallel version of the SUV that originated in England. Established in 1948 as an adaptation of the US jeep, the Land Rover was initially conceived as a sturdy vehicle for use on muddy English farms. However, it was soon adopted by the British army, as well as other European armed forces, and became widely recognized for its ruggedness and versatility. Civilian versions of the Land Rover arrived in the US in the 1960s, but it remained a small segment of the auto industry until its relaunch under new ownership in 1987. In addition to its military association, the Land Rover attained iconic status as the vehicle of intrepid safari-goers, an image that Land Rover continues to trade upon.

In 1982 four new or fully redesigned SUV models were introduced, marking the first indication of significant manufacturer (and, ostensibly, consumer) interest in SUVs. By 1984 accelerating sales of SUVs had become an established trend in the automobile industry. Total US sales of SUVs doubled in 1983 and 1984 and would continue to grow steadily each year thereafter, except during the 1990–1 recession and in 1987, during which an influx of small SUVs and pick-up trucks competed for market share. The compact truck market, an undifferentiated auto class including SUVs as well as pick-up trucks, jeeps, and minivans, was by 1984 the fastest-growing segment of the automotive industry. In particular, the Chevrolet Blazer, Ford Bronco II, and Jeep Cherokee emerged as Detroit’s top sellers. Industry observers and four-wheel-drive aficionados marveled at the growing popularity of SUVs, while automakers enjoyed handsome profits by taking advantage of loopholes in fuel-efficiency and safety regulations that exempted trucks.

Michael Coates, editor of 4-Wheel Drive & Off-Road, a special interest magazine founded in the late 1970s for off-road hobbyists, noted: ‘People who in years past would never think of owning a truck are buying them. Suddenly it’s become respectable to drive up to the country club in an S-10 Blazer’ (New York Times, 1984: 29). A 1986 ad for GMC Jimmy declares: ‘Today, as the vehicles of preference for so many interesting buyers, trucks border on the glamorous’ (Business Week, Autumn 1986).

The new popularity of SUVs coincided with the introduction of the minivan, which first appeared in late 1983 as the Dodge Caravan. The minivan initially represented a highly functional and relatively hip alternative to the old wood-paneled station wagon. While the minivan’s practicality remains its central appeal, its image soon became that of an unexciting family vehicle, particularly in contrast to the SUV. Sales of minivans remained strong throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, but as the replacement of the station wagon, it became a negative foil to the SUV. The popularity of the SUV quickly transcended its initial appeal as a wealthy status symbol, reaching middle-class Americans who embraced it as a practical family vehicle shorn of the minivan’s impotence. Where the minivan represented domesticity and stagnation, the SUV represented freedom and bravado. As one columnist noted: ‘Bring together a group of professional men, and the disdain – the unmitigated contempt – for the minivan is palpable’ (Ferguson, 1997: 76).

In less than a decade the SUV was catapulted from manufacturing backwater to darling
of the auto industry and the preferred vehicle of millions of Americans. By the mid-1990s more than 20 SUV models were in production, forming what might be viewed as the first wave of SUVs. Though comprising a wide variety of makes and models, the underlying unity of this first generation was its shared military antecedent – the Second World War era US Jeep and, to a lesser extent, the British Land Rover. The SUV’s popularity continued to grow during the late 1990s and into the 21st century. By the mid 1990s, however, a second generation of SUVs began to emerge, one that referenced a new military model, the Humvee. Introduced to Americans during the widely televised 1991 Gulf War, the Humvee, or Hummer in its civilian form, would become the inspiration for larger, brawnier models of SUVs during the second half of the decade.

AUTOMOBILITY IN A CULTURE OF FEAR

The rise of the SUV can be placed within the context of American fear of crime during the 1970s and early 1980s and, more generally, within the context of heightened risk consciousness in an emerging ‘culture of fear’ (Furedi, 1997; Glassner, 1999). Concern over public safety is, of course, as old as civilization itself; it is implicit in the structures of law and order that govern human populations wherever they congregate. However, ‘fear of crime’, as opposed to actual rates of victimization, did not exist as an articulated social problem until the late 1960s, and it soon became a popular index for assessing the civic health of the nation. Yet, as an indicator of social reality, fear of crime proved problematic. What researchers discovered – and communication scholars such as George Gerbner (2002) sought to explain – is that, contrary to commonsense assumptions, fear of crime often exceeds the actual risk of personal harm. Thus, even during times in which statistical rates of crime are decreasing, public fear of crime might remain high. In fact, this was the case in the US during the 1980s and 1990s. As a reified social problem, fear of crime took on a life of its own.

From 1973 to 1981 US crime rates did show a pattern of gradual increase (New York Times, 1987), a statistical trend that did not go unnoticed by the media or the public, particularly in urban areas. A 1982 New York Times article documenting the pervasive sense of insecurity among New Yorkers carried the headline ‘Fear of Crime Is Now Woven Into the Fabric of City Lives’ (Meislin, 1982). Portraying a city under siege, the article notes that

increasing numbers of New Yorkers in comfortable neighborhoods have come to know – many through frustrating firsthand experience – what residents of the city’s poorer areas discovered long ago: that the city’s undermanned and overburdened police force is able neither to prevent them from becoming victims nor to bring the vast majority of criminals to justice. (p. A8)

A 1981 Gallup survey revealed that fear of crime was the number one reason that individuals choose to move out of large cities (Herbers, 1981). In 1983, even after the crime rate had started to decline, a Gallup poll found that ‘fear of crime continues to pervade American society’ (New York Times, 1983: 88).
This fear was not limited to cities. Rising rates of crime in the suburbs caused residents of affluent and middle-class neighborhoods to take notice. In Wilton, Connecticut, for example, a sharp rise in home break-ins prompted heightened vigilance. The *New York Times* (1982) reported: ‘Residents here say they are not gripped with fear over a wave of home burglaries that has engulfed suburban areas nationwide. But a concern for personal safety has crept into life in this bucolic town, they say, something that probably has not happened since the British Army retreated’ (p. B2). A decade later a *Fortune* magazine article announced that ‘U.S. suburbs are under siege’. Amid a litany of harrowing anecdotes, the author notes that crime ‘is beginning to change the way suburbanites (nearly half the US population) spend their money, how they drive, where and when they shop, how they dress’ (Farnham, 1992: 42). The growth of ‘fortified’ gated communities during the 1980s, particularly so called ‘lifestyle’ and ‘prestige’ communities, was largely a response to growing fear of crime (Blakely and Snyder, 1997).

As crime spilled beyond its acceptable inner-city limits and into previously ‘safe’ suburban neighborhoods, it seemed that no one could claim to be immune from victimization. The long arm of crime reached indiscriminately into the suburbs and upscale urban enclaves, breeching the traditional geographic insulations of social status and wealth and rendering them useless. Just as the totalizing threat of nuclear annihilation and environmental pollution negated the protective barriers of class in the global ‘risk society,’ according to Ulrich Beck (1992), the pervasiveness of crime – or at least the perception of crime – had the effect of democratizing the risk of criminal victimization in American society.

Public fear of crime prompted a boom in home security systems, as those with means sought to readjust the risk calculus in their favor. From 1979 to 1983 sales of home security systems nearly doubled with business expanding at an annual rate of almost 30 per cent (Greenwald, 1983). This growth industry included everything from improved door locks to sophisticated electronic alarms. Yet, even after crime rates receded in the mid-1980s, sales of home security systems remained strong, propelled by lingering fear of crime. Public interest in personal safety devices such as mace and, later, pepper sprays, also increased. Mace was first made available for civilian purchase in 1981, and pepper spray, developed during the mid-1980s to ward off bears, was marketed to civilians in compact spray tubes by 1992.

Such popular do-it-yourself measures reflect what Beck (1992) termed the ‘individualization of social risk’, whereby risk management in modern Western societies is increasingly accepted as a personal, rather than collective, responsibility (p. 100). Moreover, as Beck notes, the emphasis on individual initiative tends to mask underlying systemic causes of risk – in the case of the Reagan era fear of crime, economic turbulence and widening inequality. Indeed, the popularity of the SUV would trade heavily upon its association with boot-strapping individualism, particularly as affluent suburbanites and middle-class commuters began moving into gentrified quarters of major cities throughout the US during the 1980s.

Such urban ‘renewal’ projects, which occurred as part of a general economic restructuring of capital in post-industrial cities, suggested a struggle between civilization and savagery as mostly white professionals ‘rehabilitated’ fringe neighborhoods and
undervalued historic real estate. As Smith (1986) observes, the cultural symbolism of the 19th-century American frontier and late 20th-century urban reclamation bear striking resemblance. 'In the language of gentrification, the appeal to frontier imagery is exact: urban pioneers, urban homesteaders and urban cowboys are the new folk heroes of the urban frontier’ (p. 16). While the SUV represented the colonizing vehicle of gentrification, it would play a similar but inverted role in the frontier drama of ‘exurban’ migration during the 1990s. The names of several SUVs even reference the American West (and its conquered native population) explicitly – the Bronco, Cherokee, Mazda Navajo, and Chevy Tahoe.

The individualization of social risk is also reflected in a distinct strand of popular vigilantism that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. For example, the Guardian Angels, a civilian paramilitary organization, were formed in 1979 to fight crime on local streets, and in 1984 Bernard Goetz, New York’s ‘subway vigilante’, shot four black teens who threatened to rob him. Goetz, who is white, received an outpouring of public sympathy for, rightly or wrongly, taking matters into his own hands. Vigilantism also became a popular subject of Hollywood movies, including a series of Charles Bronson and Clint Eastwood films featuring vigilantes who personally seek out and exact violent retribution for criminal offenses against their loved ones. In one such film, *Sudden Impact* (1983), Eastwood snarls, ‘go ahead, make my day’, becoming the dictum of vigilante combative ness. Even President Reagan invoked the phrase to swaggering political effect.

Fear of crime was also projected in cult films such as *Mad Max* (1979) and *Escape from New York* (1981), both of which featured lawless future societies where criminal violence is rife. In *Escape from New York*, for example, the entire city of New York has become so crime-ridden that the city itself is abandoned, cordoned off, and used to incarcerate criminals. Such dystopic science fiction, according to Furedi (1997), reflects a view of the future that is fundamentally bereft of hope or promise, encouraging an attitude of fatalistic resignation. ‘It is important to note,’ Furedi writes, ‘that when the future is deemed to be very threatening, it is the present-day society that is condemned’ (p. 62). Gerbner (2002), who began analyzing media violence in the late 1960s, concluded that the ubiquity of televised violence, from news programming to drama, actually incited fear of crime and promoted a ‘siege mentality’ (p. 206). In effect, Gerbner argued, the US mass media cultivated a mainstream view of social reality that promoted heightened insecurity and risk consciousness – what he termed the ‘mean world syndrome’.

While US crime rates actually decreased somewhat during the mid-1980s, public anxiety did not. The attempted assassination of President Reagan in 1981 underscored the danger and ubiquity of handguns in American society. The Brady Bill, a legislative initiative named after the White House press secretary paralyzed in the assassination attempt, focused attention on the issue during the 1980s and early 1990s. The polarizing debate over gun control, both then and now, is indicative of public anxiety over the threat of violent crime and its cause: too many guns versus not enough guns. The late 1980s also saw an influx of cheap, imported military assault weapons, notably the AK-47, and the public sale of ‘cop-killer’ armor-piercing bullets, prompting many ‘outgunned’ police departments to trade in their own weapons for more lethal models in
what was billed as an ‘arms race’ with ruthless street thugs (Kristof, 1986). A corresponding vehicular arms race would be played out in the development of SUVs.

After a brief period of decline, US crime rates once again crept upward during the early 1990s. However, in addition to the usual concerns over murder, rape, and robbery, a new form of victimization, car jacking, gained special notoriety. This crime, in which a parked or traffic-stopped motorist is forced from his or her car by a knife- or gun-wielding assailant, represented a particularly loathsome invasion of privacy (New York Times, 1992). Americans had generally felt safe in their cars and reacted with great anxiety when this space became a new arena for crime. Moreover, instances of car jackings accompanied by rape or infant kidnapping – usually unintentional, as young children happened to be strapped in the backseat of the stolen vehicle – suggested that even a drive to the mall or supermarket could be a high stakes venture. Public perception of crime as the ‘most important problem’ in America soared to an all-time high in 1994 (Lowry, Nio and Leitner, 2003).

At least one influential advertising consultant, French medical anthropologist Clotaire Rapaille, contends that the American SUV phenomenon is a direct, primal expression of public fear of crime. Rapaille’s consumer studies, which focus on the deep-seated unconscious motivations governing purchase decisions, suggest that the SUV represents an archetypal, ‘reptilian’ desire for survival and procreation. As Bradsher (2002) reports, ‘Rapaille sees Americans as increasingly fearful of crime. He acknowledges that this fear is irrational and completely ignores statistics showing that crime rates have declined considerably’ (p. 95). Echoing the conclusions of Gerbner, Rapaille cites the profusion of violent media images as the main source of generalized anxiety among Americans. He notes that middle-aged Americans, the target market for SUVs, are especially safety conscious. ‘For Rapaille, the archetype of a sport utility reflects the reptilian desire for survival. People buy SUVs, he tells auto executives, because they are trying to look as menacing as possible to allay their fears of crime and other violence’ (p. 96). Rapaille has observed that

the United States is in some ways becoming a medieval society, in which people live and work in the modern equivalent of castles – gated communities, apartment buildings with doormen and office buildings with guards – and try to shield themselves while traveling between them. They do this by riding in sport utility vehicles, which look armored, and by trying to appear as intimidating as possible to potential attackers. (Bradsher, 2000: 5)

In contrast to the SUV, Rapaille notes, the convertible has become increasingly unpopular. ‘Women were telling me, if you drive a convertible with the top down, the message is “Rape me”’ (Bradsher, 2000: 100). Despite his somewhat unconventional perspective – he once suggested that SUVs would sell even better if guns were mounted to their roofs – Rapaille is a sought-after psychological consultant who has conducted market research for major clients such as Daimler-Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors, all manufacturers of SUVs.
EUPHEMISTIC SAFETY

The notion that SUVs are exceptionally safe vehicles is largely due to their four-wheel-drive capability, which provides good handling in bad weather, and their tall profile, which grants drivers a panoramic view of the road and emerging traffic patterns. However, mainstream coverage of SUVs and SUV advertisements themselves suggest that the safety justification is more broadly an appeal to a militaristic sense of security, self-defense, and invincibility. ‘With a four-by-four’, one New York Times reporter notes, ‘it’s not the actual it’s the potential. Like a T-shirt from karate school, ‘4x4’ on your chassis or ‘4WD’ on your mudguard says that you’re capable of a great deal more than you happen to be doing at the moment. And that’s not only a great feeling, it’s a comforting thought. (Maynard, 1987: 16) The comparison to karate is not incidental. The link between bad weather handling and bad neighborhood handling is quite obvious.

Modeled on the US Army jeep and the British Land Rover, the SUV is self-consciously styled as a modified military vehicle. In some cases, the name of the SUV itself evokes conquest and imperialism: Trooper, Blazer, Pathfinder, Range Rover, 4Runner (gun-runner?), Bravada. During the early 1980s, car makers realized that these rugged, boxy vehicles could be sold in even greater numbers by simply upgrading the upholstery and adding air-conditioning, radios, and power features. The interiors required updating but the basic aesthetic of the vehicles remained a key selling point. ‘While every passenger car in the world pays homage to aerodynamics, utes continue to be as square-cut and straightforward as building blocks. SUV owners like them that way’ (Popular Mechanics, 1988: 94, italics in original). The SUV’s association with American military might is duly noted by Hal Sperlick, president of Chrysler, who said of the jeep, ‘It’s awesome. I mean, Jeep won the war. It’s like Ike. It’s America’ (Hoyt, 1987: 83).

This barebones aesthetic that lends the SUV its utilitarian aura did become more streamlined and curvaceous by the 1990s. However, even sleek SUVs retained their four-wheel-drive capabilities and could be outfitted with tubular steel grates and permanent roof racks that, though mostly unnecessary, suggest military-grade protection and versatility. As Rapaille notes, the interiors of new SUVs may exude luxury and comfort – feminine warmth and procreation – but the exteriors remain masculine, intimidating, and warlike (Bradsher, 2002). The headline of an ad for the Mitsubishi Montero essentially confirms this: ‘The ideal vehicle for “type A” personalities. Aggressive on the outside, uncompromising on the inside’ (New Yorker, 31 October 1994). Commenting on the SUV phenomenon in 1987, one observer writes:

Four-by-fours suggest rangeland or combat. Mothers wheeling into the school parking lot in their four-by-fours resemble a flanking maneuver by Rommel’s Afrika Korps . . . many four-by-fours seem to have been designed for two or three close friends, their rifles, and a medium-sized dog. (Maynard, 1987: 16)

Despite its image as a macho, masculine vehicle, growing numbers of women began to opt for SUVs over cars or minivans for similar reasons as men – their ruggedness and
brawn rather than their practicality. A *Vogue* article notes that the new SUVs recall the jeep as a ‘lively, even poignant reminder of war’s elemental state’ (Thomas, 1989: 248). By 1989 women already represented one-third of the primary drivers of SUVs (Bagot, 1989). As a female SUV driver, quoted in *Time*, explains: ‘For years men drove around in big cars and trucks and looked down at women, at their legs. Now I think a lot of women are enjoying riding around and looking down on the little men’ (Greenwald, 1994: 57).

The much-touted invincibility of SUVs is especially interesting in light of specialty articles for outdoorsmen and four-wheel-drive hobbyists that stress exactly the opposite. ‘The paramount, overriding, *Numero Uno* rule for such [off-road] driving is to appreciate that neither you nor your vehicle is indestructible,’ notes one such article, adding, ‘the plea for commonsense translates into never driving into the unknown. If you’re not certain what lies ahead, get out and look’ (Kirkpatrick, 1982: 137). While actual off-road drivers were encouraged to maintain a level-headed humility, new SUV drivers were encouraged to drive headlong and brazenly through any adversity or obstacle that might cross their path.

The association with military conquest is a common feature of advertising in both trade and popular journalism involving SUVs. An ad for Toyota Land Cruiser, for example, touts the vehicle’s ‘commanding presence’ (*National Geographic*, November 1995). Another for Chevy Blazer reads: ‘Tough Chevy trucks are taking charge’ (*Ward’s Automotive Yearbook*, 1983). SUVs suggest that their owners are not only unafraid, but actively engaged in defending themselves. They are aggressively defensive. According to one review: ‘the 1989 Range Rover is neither car nor truck. It’s a luxury tank, a metro war wagon’ (Brown, 1989: N56). A reviewer of the Jeep Cherokee Sport tellingly revealed: ‘I know why many Americans own guns. It’s the same reason they own four-wheel-drive, sport-utility vehicles. It’s G.A.P.S. – the Great American Potency Syndrome, the need to have more than is needed, just in case’ (*Washington Post*, 1995: N52).

Gladwell (2004) observes that such overcompensation reflects a distorted and fatalistic sense of risk among Americans, many of whom have come to prefer the comforting passive safety of a large vehicle that can overcome and survive, rather than avoid, an accident. In other words, the best offensive is a good defense. As a technology of risk management, the SUV represents a totalizing view of risk aversion that is fundamentally conservative. As Furedi (1997) notes, the ‘precautionary principle’ that has come to dominate contemporary life reflects an overly dark view of social intercourse. ‘Not only are more people seen as strangers,’ according to Furedi, ‘but they [are] also seen as potentially threatening to our security. That is why it is better to play safe. A lifestyle influenced by the value of caution is one that is subject to new limits and restraints. It holds back social experimentation and strengthens concern about personal security’ (p. 109).

While advertisements for SUVs typically feature their capability in outback settings, these images of rocky badlands and impenetrable forests often serve as a metaphor for society and, in particular, the city. They suggest that civilization itself is an inhospitable environment, an urban jungle. This connection is glibly invoked in many SUV advertisements. The headline of one ad, featuring the image of a Toyota 4Runner parked in front of a city brownstone, states: ‘It’s the only 4-wheel drive to have in this neck of the woods’. The ad also notes that the 4Runner is ‘the ideal way to make tracks in the urban jungle’
A slightly paranoid Chevy S-10 Blazer ad attempts to reassure its prospective drivers:

*But for all its social acceptance, we’ve never forgotten Blazer’s reason for being: a rugged, maneuverable 4WD truck intended to get you away from the ordinary. And carry you high, dry and serenely through situations that are the stuff of both dreams and nightmares . . . [It] will make your heart beat faster. And not out of fright. But out of fun.* (National Geographic, December 1987)

Yet another ad, one for GMC Jimmy, portrays a desolate, pothole-riddled road with a cityscape beyond. The copy reads: ‘So you can go boldly . . . where a mere sports car would fear to travel’ (National Geographic, May 1987).

In addition to their imposing size and protective shells, SUVs also offer a useful aspect of social camouflage, enabling the well-to-do to ‘pass’ as regular working folk in urban settings. For example, an MTV executive who travels to ‘fringe neighborhoods’ in search of new talent admits that ‘he feels less conspicuous in a Jeep than in a Mercedes’ (Kuntz, 1985: 266). In Hollywood, the early 1990s trend toward ‘downscale’ vehicles is reflected in the popularity of SUVs. Some entertainment executives cite the personal hazard of driving luxury cars, especially flashy sports cars, in ‘crime-vulnerable Los Angeles’ as an explanation for Hollywood’s attraction to Range Rovers with headlight ‘rhino-guards’ (Thompson, 1992: 27).

Despite such add-on exterior excesses, the SUV is capable of suggesting a working-class solidarity and populism that enables their mostly white-collar professional drivers to appropriate a marker of ‘authentic’ manual labor and recreation. This aspect of authenticity, along with the SUV’s large, rugged exteriors, provides a passive deterrence factor. Commenting on the interior opulence beneath their rugged exteriors, one reviewer notes: ‘Some sport utility vehicles offer voice-activated cellular telephones and compact disc players, plus an option that enables owners to hide them. It’s not clear whether that feature is attractive to discourage theft or to avoid the appearance of snobbishness’ (Bates, 1994: B1).

**EUPHEMISTIC SPACE**

It is no new observation that the wealthy are drawn to conspicuously large vehicles – Cadillacs, Oldsmobiles, and Lincolns, for example. Indeed, the wealthy and socially privileged tend to occupy more space than others. They drive and are chauffeured in larger cars, they own larger homes with larger yards, they are entitled to larger swathes of social space in public, they travel in first-class rather than coach, they work in offices rather than partitioned cubicles. The SUV certainly abides by this social truism: it is larger than most other road vehicles and sits higher off the ground, a visual signal of social hierarchy. According to Howard Koch, Paramount Producer and Director, ‘the Mercedes is a status thing, and I’d rather drive what makes me comfortable . . . In the Jeep [Wagoneer], I sit on top of the crowd and look down’ (Kuntz, 1985: 226).

Status symbols such as the SUV are by definition prohibitive; they are inaccessible to
the majority, thus providing the scarcity upon which their value depends. The SUV, however, emphasizes a dual inaccessibility. On the one hand, they are more expensive than cars; on the other, they emphasize the disparity of spatial arrangements in public. The appropriation of social space is also associated with privacy. ‘Privacy,’ as Schwartz (1968) notes, ‘both reflects and helps maintain the status divisions of a group’ (p. 742). A large car, like a large yard, signifies a greater degree of social insulation. One can then expose oneself to the public, or not, as he or she pleases.

A Range Rover ad alludes to this privilege of social accessibility. ‘The real reason many CEOs are unavailable for comment,’ according to the headline, is that they are out traversing the mountains ‘behind the closed door’ of a Range Rover (Forbes, 24 October 1994). With the addition of tinted windows, a common SUV feature, visual access to a vehicle’s occupants may be further restricted. More importantly, such one-way viewing affords those inside the voyeuristic ability to surveil outsiders without their knowledge, thus enhancing the power differential. Privacy is not just a luxury, according to Schwartz (1968), but ‘an object of exchange’ that is commodified in terms of spatial arrangements in a host of social relationships, from hospital rooms to transportation (p. 743) – and, one might add, street space.

The Chevy Suburban, described as ‘the Incredible Hulk of sport-utility vehicles’, is one of the largest SUVs and a bestseller among the wealthy, particularly in Texas, where it has been dubbed the ‘Texas Cadillac’ (Clements, 1994: 1B). These oversized vehicles seek to recreate the comfort and privacy of one’s living room inside the vehicle. On the outside it is a massive, lumbering truck, on the inside it is plush and luxuriously appointed. An ad for the Suburban shows a richly decorated family room, done in hunting-lodge style, with the caption, ‘We’ve taken this concept and put it on wheels’, along with copy that reads, ‘Imagine taking your favorite room wherever you go’ (Forbes, June 1985). In a similar fashion, an ad for the Toyota Land Cruiser boasts that it is an ‘Outback Limo’ (National Geographic, February 1988).

The idea of privileged space is also evoked in juxtapositions of country and urban living, a common motif in SUV advertising. The image of town and country gentility conjures a fantasy of landed aristocrats with gated city homes and spacious country retreats, with the SUV at home in both. At the same time, the SUV’s populist aura is appropriated in the guise of the self-reliant woodsman, which diffuses and rationalizes any overt indication of class superiority by suggesting that one’s self-selected solitude is a confrontation with nature rather than society. This privileged aesthetic is also reflected in the simultaneous popularity of rustic outdoor sport and hunting clothes during the 1980s, exemplified by companies such as L.L. Bean, Ralph Lauren, J. Crew, and Banana Republic. A Newsweek (1988) article identifying this fashion trend includes a segment on Land Rover: ‘Long the preferred country car of the European aristocracy, the Range Rover now reigns as essential equipment for every would-be American squire’ (p. 57).

As one industry observer, quoted in AutoWeek, noted: ‘the sport/utilities bring a country estate kind of feel into the city. This is something that is socially desirable, something people want to say about themselves, an image they want to project’ (Sawyer and Raynal, 1989: 18). Vogue also notes the connection between high fashion outdoor clothing and ‘the growing consumer lust’ for the SUV’s ‘tough, capable, outdoorsy’ image
as a vehicle ‘that not only can surmount the slickest or stickiest track, on or off the road, but that imputes something of its own qualities to its owner as well’ (Thomas, 1989: 248). The image of agrarian gentility suggests land ownership and social remove, as well as a degree of grit. The notion of manorial lords coming to town is evoked in a Toyota 4Runner ad with the headline, ‘City smart, country tough’ (Life, September 1988).

Such urban–rural juxtapositions in SUV advertisements correspond to the idea of the city as an urban jungle to be tamed and colonized. Though most new residents of ‘revitalized’ urban neighborhoods were already city dwellers rather than rural interlopers, the image of the urban frontier gave gentrified addresses a desirable patina of physical daring. If the SUV’s aura of working-class authenticity provided passive safety in the form of social camouflage, it also served as a fortified outpost, a sanctuary amid the reconquest and occupation of previously uninhabitable neighborhoods. The image of circled Conestoga wagons comes to mind. It is here that euphemistic safety and euphemistic space converge. What is interesting to note, however, is the way in which risk aversion is refigured as risk taking in the SUV. This inversion can be linked with Furedi’s (1997) observation that in a world plagued with risks, one is thought to be ‘doing a good job just by surviving’ (p. 12). Amid such low expectations, everyday activities – such as driving in the general vicinity of a low-income neighborhood – are elevated to acts of heroism.

While projecting a facade of confident social mastery, SUVs were more tellingly presented as a means to retreat from the maddening crowd. This is part and parcel of the ‘lifestyle’ dimension so often attributed to consumer interest in SUVs. Like its association with soldiers, tough outdoorsmen, and country squires, driving an SUV suggests one’s freedom to be outside, to put social distance between oneself and others at will. The SUV’s ability to traverse the world’s most inhospitable terrain is another way of suggesting that one can – and must – go to extremes to escape one’s fellows. One ad features a Jeep Grand Cherokee perched on a desolate rocky ridge with the following copy: ‘How on Earth do you lose 5.6 billion people?’ (National Geographic, October 1995). SUV owners are not necessarily rushing to nature, but fleeing ‘a world of risky strangers’ (Furedi, 1997).

A recurring motif in SUV advertisements is the image of a solitary SUV sitting atop a mountain or cliff or nestled in a lakeside knoll, completely cut off from the rest of the world. While the imagery of surmounting a rugged environment certainly serves as a metaphor for conquest and domination, it also suggests the pure safety of solitude. In an ad for Ford Explorer, featuring a pristine canyon lake, the copy beckons: ‘You want to go where no one has gone before’ (Business Week, 25 May 1992). Indeed, SUV ads suggest that prospective buyers are obsessed with getting away from it all. An ad for Chevy Blazer, for example, touts its ability ‘to escape completely from civilization’ (National Geographic, November 1987). Bradsher (1997) aptly summarizes the connection between personal safety and adventurous retreat:

As the distance – physical and financial – between rich and poor grows, so does the appeal of the sport utility vehicle. Chevrolet Suburbs and Ford Expeditions amply protect their occupants from the outside world while holding the allure of vacations in beautiful and remote places where lesser cars cannot tread. (p. 3)
As Bradsher suggests, lifestyle-centered appeals to rugged adventure and remote travels are tempered by a paradoxical concern with safety. Such oxymoronic ‘safe adventure,’ it seems, is not really adventure at all but a desire to retreat from others in relative safety and comfort. An ad for Chevy Blazer reads: ‘so thoughtfully designed, that even when you’re in the middle of nowhere, you’ll be somewhere very comfortable’ (Time, 14 December 1992). The image is tranquil: an SUV at the foot of a snow-capped mountain. Another ad reads: ‘This Jeep Grand Cherokee is hundreds of miles from civilization. Its driver, however, isn’t’, with additional copy that explains, ‘Jeep Grand Cherokee Limited is engineered to take you far away from civilization without removing you from the luxuries of life’ (New Yorker, 10 January 1994). These appeals carry a distinct subtext of privilege: only those with ample time and resources can afford such far-flung vacations. These are not ads targeted at working-class outdoorsmen or seasoned campers, but insecure cosmopolitan drivers less concerned with actually roughing it than with being roughed up.

SUVs may ‘drive you to extremes’ (Life, July 1985), as an ad for the Chevy S-10 Blazer proclaims, but such extremes do not compare with the security of one’s home. If fear of society has driven Americans to an imaginary frontier, it is the SUV that ensures that the driver is safe and in control at all times. However, as a Toyota 4Runner ad suggests, even safe adventure produces uncertainty and anxiety: ‘No matter how far the journey, the need to make it home is basic . . . Why is it the farther away we travel the more we think about home? Is it the fear of not making it back? Or is it just natural instinct?’ (New Yorker, 16 May 1994).

THE HUMVEE AND BEYOND

The SUV first emerged as a status symbol in the early 1980s and, with the introduction of the civilian version of the military Humvee in 1992, it came full circle. Built by AM General, the Humvee (High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle) was commissioned to replace the jeep and put into production for the US military in 1983. Public fascination with the Humvee during the first Gulf War prompted the development of a civilian version, which appeared in 1992 as the Hummer. Priced at almost $100,000, the massive civilian Hummer was embraced as an ultra-macho novelty vehicle by celebrities including Arnold Schwarzenegger. During the mid-1990s, the Hummer increasingly appeared in films, on television, and as hired limousines for celebrity events, but remained a rarity on American roads. In 1999 the rights to Hummer were sold to General Motors, which introduced the H2 Hummer, a less expensive version at around $50,000, in 2002.

If the first generation of SUVS were notable for their self-preservative and quasi-militaristic characteristics, the Hummer took such features to a new and much more explicit level. At more than 6.5 feet (2 metres) wide, 6.5 feet (2 metres) tall, and 6400 (2909 kg) pounds, the Hummer, as the New York Times described it, is ‘an army of one’ (Cobb, 2003). All of the latent and manifest defensive features of previous SUVS are vastly surpassed by the Hummer. It is an unabashedly intimidating replica of the armored personnel vehicle currently used by the world’s most powerful and technologically advanced
And, with the Humvee’s 2003 reprise in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Hummer H2 became one of the most chic and popular vehicles in America, with more than a third of its sales going to women (Cobb, 2003). A recent television ad features a woman driving a Hummer through city streets, with the tagline, ‘Slip into something a little more metal’.

As an embodiment of physical safety and privileged social space, the Hummer certainly stands alone. However, its relationship to public perception of crime and social danger is uncertain. The Hummer belongs to a second generation of SUVs, one that emerged during the mid-to-late 1990s and distinguished by increasingly exaggerated dimensions and aggressive styling, as exemplified by the Cadillac Escalade and Dodge Durango, both introduced in 1998. But even more, as a vehicle whose fuel economy is less than 10 miles per gallon (23.5 liters/100 km), the Hummer conflates rationalized risk management with conspicuous consumption. Unlike the first generation, which drew upon the diminutive, Spartan jeep and notions of practicality, the Hummer and its near relatives are decidedly oversized, over-equipped, and impractical. The Hummer itself has become the military model for the second generation of SUVs.

Such outsized late-1990s models convey a cavalier egotism that is less indicative of heightened risk consciousness than of overt class consciousness. The Hummer demands to be noticed and admired as an exclusionary status symbol. The protective features of second generation SUVs seem gratuitously aesthetic in comparison to earlier models; like Renaissance codpieces, their progressive ostentation has effaced their utilitarian origins.
One recent Hummer commercial, consisting of a kaleidoscopic montage of the vehicle's chrome rims, headlights, grille, and tires, concludes with the flippant tagline, 'Accessories.' Gone are the associations with working-class authenticity or rural gentility. The Hummer is marketed as high-end automotive jewelry, reflecting the way in which risk management is commodified and placed within a hierarchy of competitive consumption.

The Hummer is at a significant remove from the original context of the SUV's emergence, but it serves as a useful point of reference to trace back the trajectory of the SUV. In this sense, it may be viewed as a culmination of earlier desires for safety and security. It is interesting that the SUV, which emerged in part as a physical and psychological response to public fear of crime, has itself become a source of incivility and public menace. The SUV phenomenon made SUVs ubiquitous on American roads, eliminating the height advantage they initially enjoyed as a minority among cars and clogging roadways and parking lots with ever-larger models. As one commentator notes, the popularity of SUVs has resulted in a 'highway arms race' in which car drivers feel compelled to purchase larger SUVs merely to increase their odds of survival in an auto accident (Cloud, 2003: 34).

Ironically, for many drivers the SUV is no longer a refuge for the socially fearful but part of the problem – an ever-present threat to bodily safety on the road and, as its post-9/11 detractors argue, a threat to national security by fostering American over-reliance on oil from the Middle East. New Republic commentator Gregg Easterbrook (2003) has even suggested that SUVs be retermed 'FUVs' to better reflect their 'fuck you' social ethic (p. 34). As such recent backlash suggests, the SUV has evolved from a euphemistic panacea to an explicit provocation, becoming a new variable in an apparently escalating and self-perpetuating cycle of public anxiety in contemporary American society.

From this vantage, the SUV may be viewed in light of what Ferrell (2002) has termed the 'everyday criminality of the automobile'. Hidden behind the entrenched ideology of American car culture, the automobile's criminality, according to Ferrell, is manifest in 'the daily victimization of passengers, pedestrians, and bicyclists by the thousands' (p. 195). While the media and the public obsess over topical issues such as car jacking, road rage, defective Firestone tires, sleepy drivers, drug-addled car thieves, cell phone distracted drivers, and OPEC's manipulation of oil prices, cars in the US – and SUVs in particular – continue to exact a daily body count and environmental toll that, in relative terms, elicits little controversy.

As Glassner (1999) notes, 'pseudodangers' such as road rage 'represent further opportunities to avoid problems we do not want to confront, such as overcrowded roads and the superabundance of guns, as well as those [problems] we have grown tired of confronting' (p. 8), not least of which is economic insecurity. The perversity of this displaced social anxiety is nicely captured in Glassner's observation that in the years between 1980 and 1995 'a working person was roughly four to five times more likely to be the victim of a layoff in any given year than to be the victim of a violent crime committed by a stranger' (p. 29).

A world without automobiles might be unimaginable, but the SUV, like gentrification and gated communities, implicitly rationalized the economic segregation of public space and the unequal allocation of natural resources – all in the name of personal risk
management. If the SUV provided a haven of euphemistic safety and space for upwardly mobile Americans during the 1980s and 1990s, it did so at considerable social, environmental, and (arguably) geo-political cost (see Figure 3). Couched in the coded discourse of ‘safe adventure’, the SUV was commodified as a technological solution to crime that legitimized an atomizing ‘mean world’ perspective and, in turn, justified its own criminality.

Notes

2 Space may also be associated with a third key attribute linked to the popularity of the SUV: adventure. As a cultural icon, the American automobile has been associated with freedom and adventure since its earliest appearance, giving the SUV no unique claim to this generalized emotional appeal.
3 These are both alternative, though complementary, hypotheses that could be explored in further research. Andersen (2000) offers passing but suggestive comment on the role of SUV advertising in conflating environmental consciousness with consumer identity.

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