

The Lost Art of Backing Up

on [Jamie Lincoln Kitman](#)

For the umpteenth time, the National Highway Traffic Safety Agency (NHTSA) has postponed issuing a rule that would require automakers to install backup cameras in all vehicles. In large part, this (delayed) regulation is the result of the Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act of 2007 (named after a two-year-old boy who died tragically when his poor dad accidentally ran him over backing out of the family driveway). Given the awful consequences of reversing accidents, the Act required that something needed to be done. And it's hard to argue with that. One independent group, [kidsandcars.org](#), which championed the legislation, estimates that two deaths and more than fifty people (mostly children and elderly citizens) are injured each week from reversing accidents, with seventy percent of drivers involved being parents or close relatives.



Rear view camera in the 2011 Lincoln MKT's center console. (Lincoln photo)

No surprise the auto industry has opposed the regulation on the basis of cost, which it has estimated will add about \$200 to the cost of new cars not already equipped with nav screens; although it concedes that buyers of cars already equipped with some sort of nav screen may pay less than \$60 more for backup cameras. It also bears mentioning that some forty-five percent of new cars now being sold have such a feature as standard, with a sizable number also offering it as an option. And those numbers are rising. Nonetheless, the industry, never reticent to quantify the unbearable pain the government will unleash upon its customers, calculates that it will in aggregate cost car buyers as much as \$2.7 billion to install the cameras. Yet, you can be sure if it was your loved one whose life was saved – or the child of someone you know – an extra \$200 would seem a small price to pay, as against the average \$33,000 price of a new car in 2011.

Officially, NHTSA has halted the regulation's implementation for further study into how exactly it should be drafted, with an eye to enactment in time for the 2014 model year. And while the delay has predictably drawn right-wing ire – paradoxically, but not untypically, both for its postponement and its existence (notwithstanding its unanimous passage by the Senate in 2008 and by voice vote in the House the previous year) – the time out is not without foundation.

One important issue to be addressed has to do with how long it takes for a rear-viewing screen to come up once a car has been placed in reverse. Extensive familiarity with such devices in test cars has in our experience proven them seriously erratic in their operation. Many reversing cameras don't turn on right away – leaving more than enough time to strike something while backing up. Others don't shut off once you've begun moving forward, which is distracting and may deprive you of some other important vehicle function controlled through the same screen or panel.

In reverse, the same car may engage the camera immediately one time but take fifteen seconds or more another time (presumably due to overtaxed electronic architectures). In other tests, cameras were found to be disabled by snow and ice.

As automakers race to fill new cars with evermore features controlled by ever fewer buttons and dials, you just know they're still wringing the bugs out of the code for these things long after they've shipped their cars to the dealer. A little more time for everyone to think about it a little more, to get on the same page, might not be a bad idea.



I, for one, would still like to know more about the old-fashioned reversing mirrors as seen on many delivery trucks. While there's an electronics industry lobby surely standing in the way, old-fashioned reversing mirrors seem to work well enough for FedEx and UPS.

In the meantime, the whole kerfuffle gives us occasion to reflect on backing up in general, a practice that has become something of a lost art; one that has been made immeasurably more difficult and dangerous by some of the heinous design trends of the last twenty years, most notably the one towards unnecessarily high vehicles – yes, SUVs – and the reduced visibility they offer.

Remember when you had to turn around to look behind you? Thanks in good measure to the jacked-up behemoths that began to roam the land en masse in the 'Nineties, it's become a largely futile practice. Not that the trend to ever fatter and less physically fit drivers has helped, but once people got used to not turning around, it apparently liberated carmakers to design cars of even ordinary height so that you couldn't see behind you. Trunks started getting higher. A-, B- and C-pillars (the things that support the roof) started getting thicker, further reducing visibility, sometimes in the name of safety, but mostly owing to careless design in pursuit of aggressive looks.

The time-honored practice of placing one's arm across the passenger seatback, securing one's self for a clear look back, became an anachronism. Meanwhile as cars became quieter and sound systems grew ever more bumping, we started losing the ability to hear what was going on outside the cocoon. At least some times back in the day, when all else failed, the sound of metal twisting or grandma screaming used to do the trick.



Vehicle trunks as well as the vehicles themselves keep getting higher and higher, further limiting visibility. (GM photo)

In a modern car equipped with a reversing camera, it's hard to know quite what to do. When you take your driver's test, they still tell you to look backwards while reversing. But actually shouldn't you really be looking at the camera? Then again, the camera often only shows you what's directly behind the car. Shouldn't you also be looking in your side-view mirrors as well as the camera? And wouldn't a visual confirmation on the camera's view by actually looking out your back window, and occasional peeks at the central rear-view mirror, also be wise? The opportunities for confusion and disorientation multiply exponentially. Meanwhile people are further encouraged to disengage from the act of driving, turning more control over to their machines.

It's an imperfect situation, and the solution itself, I fear, will be imperfect. But while grumbling about government meddling, critics of reversing regulation should remember that like most regulations this one has been brought on by the industry itself. Just as gross pollution and appalling fuel economy led to the Clean Air Act and CAFÉ regulations, just as the industry's reluctance to install seatbelts led to laws mandating them, and just as the stampede into SUVs led to rules mandating electronic stability controls to curb what was becoming an epidemic of rollovers, the same pernicious SUV trend has resulted in a need for backup cameras. The same people who want to carry guns everywhere so they may respond to bad actors threatening their safety and that of their loved ones, need to appreciate that this regulation is just another example of the inevitable consequences of corporate actors pursuing profits at the expense of public safety. In the name of Cameron Gulbransen and others like him, the sheriff had to act.

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