Audi's Runaway Trouble With the 5000

By Brock Yates
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I recently watched in fascination as Ed Bradley reported on the CBS-TV show "60 Minutes" that the 1978-'86 Audi 5000 sedans can treacherously launch themselves like misfired missiles when their automatic transmission levers are placed in drive or reverse. This phenomenon, labeled "unintended acceleration," has allegedly been responsible for several deaths, including a particularly poignant one -- tearily documented on the show -- in which a pretty young mother crushed her young son against the back wall of a garage. The segment included testimony from several victims. They decried Audi's suggestion that the trouble lay not in a mechanical flaw but in driver error.

Audi says the drivers accidentally hit the accelerator, not the brakes, after engaging the transmission. Although Bradley acknowledged Audi's explanation and interviewed two of its engineers, he clearly sided with the owners.

"60 Minutes" portrayed the Audi 5000 as a flawed automobile, perhaps cursed by its "idle stabilizer control," a fuel system component that supposedly triggers "transient malfunctions" without warning.

But wait a minute, did Bradley tell us everything? There is no arguing that Audi is in serious trouble with the 5000: Sales are down 20 percent and the Center for Auto Safety has taken the position that the Department of Transportation should require Audi to buy back all its 5000s. Further, an Audi spokesman agrees that "hundreds" of acceleration incidents have occurred in the 5000s. The Center for Auto Safety has received 500 reports and believes more than 750 reports have been made altogether. Audi has ceased to stonewall the issue. "We take the responsibility to resolve the problem," says Audi public relations director Edward Triolo. Furthermore, the phenomenon of "unintended acceleration" is not new. The problem has occurred in a variety of autos with automatic transmissions. More than 2,000 complaints have been made about General Motors models built between 1973 and 1986. Owners of Toyotas, Renaults, Mercedes-Benzes and Nissans have also reported unintended acceleration incidents. However, the Audi 5000 has the highest percentage of acceleration incidents: about 1 in 400 cars built.

Triolo says that in the 270 accidents that have been examined by Audi engineers, only six idle-speed stabilizers were found defective and not in a way that would cause rapid, unexpected acceleration. More important, the Audi 5000 -- with its 2.2-liter, five-cylinder engine developing only 110 hp -- simply does not have enough power to override its brakes. (Drivers involved in the incidents swear they are standing on the brakes. Audi has found no instances of brake failure in autos it has examined.)

Who's right? Will an Audi 5000 outmuscle its own brakes? I borrowed a 1984 Audi 5000, floored the accelerator with my right foot and stepped on the brake hard with my left foot. Then I moved the transmission from park to drive. And the engine stalled! It lacked sufficient power to override the

brakes. According to my brief test, for unintended acceleration to occur, two independent systems -- fuel supply and brakes -- must fail simultaneously and somehow return to normal.

Audi says it went even further. In demonstrations for both CBS and NBC, it made full-throttle acceleration runs to speeds between 30 and 50 mph and then, with the throttle on the floor, stopped the car with the brakes.

All of which raises some interesting questions "60 Minutes" failed to ask about the Audi 5000 incidents:

Why, after millions of starts over an eight-year period, haven't there been any runaway 5000s reported at Audi's 410 dealerships?

Why do there seem to be more of these incidents among drivers who have relatively little experience driving the Audi 5000? (There are an inordinate number of such incidents within the first 2,000 miles of the life of a given car.)

Why are there no reported accidents with the Audi 4000 Quattro, which has an identical idle stabilizer mechanism?

Why do independent experts, who have speculated that the trouble is centered on throttle linkage, the computer brain in the engine, the automatic transmission or the idle stabilizer, still openly admit there is no obvious culprit?

Why, in a number of accident investigations, did Audi engineers find the accelerator pedal bent, even snapped off, presumably by foot pressure?

While continuing to research the incidents, Audi has so far installed 32,000 interlock devices that prevent the transmission from being engaged without the driver's foot on the brake. Audi has asked all owners of the 5000 model to bring their cars in for free installation of the interlock. Audi is adamant that the device is a solution, although Triolo says the company does not expect it to eliminate the problem.

Drivers of three cars equipped with the interlocks have reported runaway crashes. In the first case, an Audi spokesman says, the driver's description of the event changed over time, and Audi representatives decided it was not a case of brake failure or runaway acceleration. In the second case, Audi says, a bushing was installed upside down, preventing the interlock from working. In the third case, Audi says it has not been allowed by the owner's attorneys to inspect the vehicle.

Audi contends that the problem of unintended acceleration is a complex one involving a number of factors, including the design of the car itself, the driver, and external distractions. Triolo says the problem of unintended acceleration is inherent in automatic transmission cars throughout the auto industry, not just in Audis.

There is one potential explanation for the runaway Audis that strikes me as obvious: The brake and accelerator pedals in the Audi 5000 are off-center, to the left. In models of the 5000 built before 1983, it was even possible to step on the brake pedal and the accelerator at the same time, a problem

Audi has since rectified. Audi maintains that brake and accelerator pedals in autos come in a wide range of placements, some farther to the left than Audi's.

I maintain the pedals are sufficiently misplaced that inexperienced drivers might easily thrust a right foot forward and hit the accelerator when intending to hit the brake. Audi has investigated at least one incident in which a 5000 was driven a foot or so into a concrete wall in a parking garage, the rear tires spinning in anguish, the driver confused as to what was happening until she finally realized her right foot was on the accelerator.

Sadly, one of the most troubling aspects of these incidents is that so many Audi 5000 drivers fail to avert disaster simply by shoving the transmission shifter into neutral or turning off the ignition. While it certainly is understandable that a panicked driver might actually press harder on the throttle of a runaway car, thinking he was stepping on the brake pedal, such a reaction also exposes the dismal training and minimal presence of mind the average American driver has when faced with an emergency.

How about a segment on driver training, Mr. Bradley?