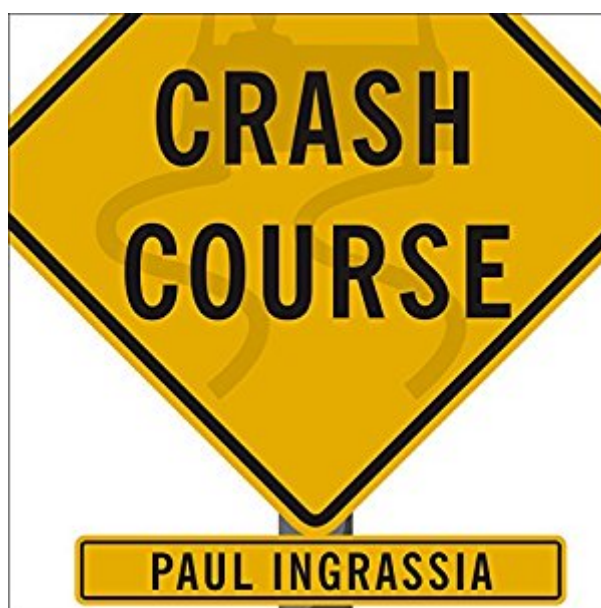


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# Crash Course: The American Automobile Industry's Road From Glory To Disaster



## Synopsis

This is the epic saga of the American automobile industry's rise and demise, a compelling story of hubris, denial, missed opportunities, and self-inflicted wounds that culminates with the president of the United States ushering two of Detroit's Big Three car companies—once proud symbols of prosperity—through bankruptcy. The cost to American taxpayers topped \$100 billion—enough to buy every car and truck sold in America in the first half of 2009. With unprecedented access, Pulitzer Prize winner Paul Ingrassia takes us from factory floors to small-town dealerships to Detroit's boardrooms to the inner sanctums of the White House. He reveals why President Barack Obama personally decided to save Chrysler when many of his advisors opposed the idea. Ingrassia provides the dramatic story behind Obama's dismissal of General Motors CEO Rick Wagoner and the angry reaction from GM's board—the same people who had watched idly while the company plunged into penury. In *Crash Course*, Ingrassia answers the big questions: Was Detroit's self-destruction inevitable? What were the key turning points? Why did Japanese automakers manage American workers better than the American companies themselves did? He also describes dysfunctional corporate cultures (even as GM's market share plunged, the company continued business as usual) and Detroit's perverse system of "inverse layoffs" (which allowed union members to invoke seniority to avoid work). Along the way we meet Detroit's frustrated reformers and witness the wrenching decisions that Ford executives had to make to avoid GM's fate. Informed by Ingrassia's twenty-five years of experience covering the auto industry for *The Wall Street Journal*, and showing an appreciation for Detroit's profound influence on our country's society and culture, *Crash Course* is a uniquely American and deeply instructive story, one not to be missed. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I normally don't write my opinions of books; everyone has their own personal tastes. I grew up in Milford, Mi, home of the GM Proving Grounds. Like so many others around me during those days, their lives were directly related to the Big Three. "As goes GM, so goes America" we used to hear when we were younger. This is not a book written from a particular political point of view . It is an excellent documentary / historical account of what has gone on in the Motor City and the entire auto industry over the past 50+ years. The growth years, the Corvair, the muscle cars, the foreign invasion, the gas crisis, Pinto and Vega, strikes, revivals, the Saturn experiment, etc. It's all here in chronological order. It runs right up to the first year after the bankruptcy of GM & Chrysler. Very timely! It was very hard to put it down at night. There were so many times I found myself saying, "Oh yeah, I remember that!" This is the fifth book in a row I've read about Detroit and the auto industry. Definitely Top Two! I must admit Ben Hamper's "Rivertown: Tales From the Assembly Line" was laugh out loud funny, (yet reading it you knew that these were some of the quintessential reasons for the collapse) and if you didn't laugh while reading it, then you didn't grow up in Michigan! If you follow the auto industry, grew up in a town that heavily depended on an auto plant, had family members or friends affected by what "this thing of ours" in Detroit was and what it is now, this book explains a lot. The author takes EVERYONE to task and also points out the good times and the good things that happened as well. Very fair and balanced & an easy read too.

I have to say that there are other excellent reviews posted here and I enjoyed reading them. I will just make a few points. The Big Three dominated the era after World War II when most of the rest of the world's industry was prostrate with war damage. They had the field to themselves. A similar story is the US healthcare system which has become a sluggish monolith with no compunction about seeking government help when necessary. The unions and the GM management, in particular, colluded (although that is probably too strong a word) to keep each other happy. The UAW did not strike and the GM management gave them what they wanted. The only party who was left out was the car buyer. The Big Three concentrated on style and ignored quality. I'm old enough to remember when nobody expected a car to last more than three years. Many people bought a new car every year. Before you turn pale at the thought of the expense, be aware that I bought my

second new car in 1968, a red Mustang convertible, for \$3050. I paid \$50 down and signed a contract for \$95 a month at my credit union. In three years, the car was paid for. My first new car was a Volkswagen bus, bought with money from my father and it cost \$1700 in 1965. The Mustang was our second car. By that time I was a resident physician on the grand salary of \$1500 per month. It's not clear if the short life span of those cars was an example of planned obsolescence or if the union just built crummy cars that looked good. I drove that Mustang for four years and sold it. I wish I hadn't because they are classics now. Ford had another problem. In the 1970s, in a story not well covered in the book, Ford was taken over by the financial people. The men who made cars, from design to the shop floor, were delegated to a back seat. Many large companies did the same thing, maybe to cope with the Carter inflation or the deep recession that followed the painful medicine to stop inflation. It ruined some of them for a while. One was Xerox. Then came the Japanese car makers. It is an interesting story how the Japanese had to respond to government attempts to prop up the US auto industry and hold the Japanese back. Each step the Japanese were forced to take made them more formidable competitors. It was punitive import duties that drove them to build factories in the US. They found that the newly energetic South was eager for the jobs so they located there. They expected to be unionized but found they had settled in a part of the country that was not pro-union. This story is very well told in the book. When GM started the Saturn to compete with the imports on quality, they built a plant in the South, and the UAW chief at the plant happened to be a rare union leader who wanted to adopt new methods and study the Japanese quality circles and other innovations in labor management cooperation. Saturn was sabotaged by both the GM management, who resented the implication that their cars were inferior, and by UAW leaders as the president of the union at that time, Stephen Yokich, was fiercely anti-management and uninterested in innovation. The project failed but shouldn't have. This is the best part of the book. I think the author has given the UAW too much of a pass and soft pedaled the Obama administration's rape of the bond holders. He implies they were predatory hedge funds that thought the GM bonds were a buy because the law places secured creditors first in a bankruptcy. The administration stiffed the bondholders, many of whom turned out to be auto industry pensioners and their pension funds. The effect of that act, a gift to the UAW for their support, will come to hurt bond sales in the future since contract law was violated for political purposes. Countries like Argentina do that, not the US, at least until now. Aside from that quibble the book was excellent.

This book read much like a novel, in that the plot twists and characters kept this reader engaged. Despite Ingrassia's robust efforts to explain the events leading up to the bankruptcies of

Chrysler and General Motors, there are - as others have noted - some factual errors in this book. First, Studebaker did not declare bankruptcy in 1966; rather, Studebaker Corporation exited the automobile business, and in fact is still in business today. The statement that most Japanese cars at the beginning of the 1970s had front-wheel drive is incorrect; almost all Toyota and Datsun (Nissan) cars were rear-wheel drive into the first half of the 1980s. The author repeatedly refers to an SUV made from model years 2007 to 2009 as a "Dodge" Aspen, when it was in fact a Chrysler Aspen. The Dodge version was a car, produced from model years 1976 to 1980. The Saturn SL2 is mentioned as being larger than the SL1. These two models were actually different trim levels of the same automobile; Saturn did not launch a larger, companion model until the L-series appeared in the 2000 model year. Small errors, to be sure, and mostly confined to the part of the book where the author sets up the overture for the reader to engage in the actual tragedy that eventually unfolds. All in all, an excellent thesis on what happens when corporate leadership and culture stands in the way of making difficult decisions for the long-term viability of a company.

A very good review of the American Auto Industry history and the coming of competition. The arrogance and feeling of importance by the Big Three are well reviewed, especially of General Motors. Close minded management examples are many. The UAW doesn't escape needed criticism either, with its excessive labor contract demands. An entertaining and well written story by Paul Ingrassia, who clearly knows and understands the auto industry.

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