

Hooked on war: The psychology of car sales

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 18, 2006](#) issue

Sixteen toy Model A Fords greet me each day in my study. In the 1927 model, modest headlights are connected by a straight bar. Its symbolic straight face is noncommittal. I carry no nightmare images from childhood confrontations with such autos. By 1931, however, the Model A revealed a slightly down-curved mounting bar, thus presenting the image of mild melancholy. The 1932 Ford V-8 with its huge goo-goo-eye headlights presented a more turned-down mouth and thus verged on gloom. I lost interest.

A wake-up call came with Jonathan Welsh's *Wall Street Journal* article (March 10) titled "Why Cars Got Angry." The subtitles: "Seeing Demonic Grins, Glaring Eyes?"; "Auto Makers Add Edge to Car 'Faces'"; "Say Goodbye to the Wide-Eyed Neon." Having paid no attention since 1932, I had never even said hello to the wide-eyed Neon. Welsh quotes car buyers who want a "wide, snarling look," "a really mean expression," "an evil look," headlights like "tiger's eyes," a "scowl," "rudeness on the road," cars that are "growling," "aggressively styled"—cars that say "get out of my way."

The Dodge design of 1995 said "Hi." The Dodge of 2006 exudes, "It's anything but cute." Mazda's old Miata, grinning slightly, was being dismissed as a "chick car," so Mazda turned the smile into a "smirk," a "sly grin." The new Toyota's face sweeps into a "leer" with its "hawklike grill." The Mustang will have a "sinister eyelid." Says the designer: "Frankly, it looks like it will bite your head off."

Carmakers have long known that buyers translate visions of chrome grilles into faces. I deduce from Welsh that men with weak egos want menacing-looking cars. Some women also choose to be nasty. An experiment: look at the faces on men and women models in fashion ads. Listen to the scorn that greets churches that preach consideration, open-mindedness, empathy. See the sales of *Left Behind* books and films in which nongentle Jesus whomps and kills.

For a moment I slipped into the language of church and Bible religion. I am trying to stay with auto and fashion religion. So let's take one more foray into autodom and the wiles of the designers and advertisers, this time via another article in the *Wall Street Journal* (March 17), this one headlined "VW Rethinks Its High-Testosterone Ads."

Miriam Jordan informs us that Spanish-speakers were subjected to VW advertisements made just for them featuring the Nuevo GTI 2006 model along with the words "TURBO-COJONES." You probably don't have to speak Spanish to know that *cojones* means balls, as in macho and gutsy.

But the campaign boomeranged, Jordan reports. It "generated a firestorm in Cuban-dominated Miami," since, as a scholar explained, in the Spanish-speaking community *cojones* "will always have a vulgar connotation." Says a naive Anglo in a Miami-based ad agency, "We never thought it would be an issue."

Some automakers and purchasers remain nonsmirking, nongrowling, nonscowling. Some people are strong enough to let little autos with friendly faces speak for them. According to Welsh, the people at Honda "like to think Hondas are smiling," and the Mini Cooper is seen as a "friendly companion." What chance do they have in an in-your-face era?