



Opening Statement of Chairman Edolphus Towns

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

February 24, 2010

“Toyota Gas Pedals: Is the Public at Risk?”

Good morning and thank you all for being here.

It is hard to imagine the horror of the event that took the lives of an entire family near San Diego, California on August 28, 2009.

California Highway Patrolman Mark Saylor, his wife, their 13-year old daughter, and Mrs. Saylor’s brother Chris, were driving in a Toyota Lexus, a loaner car that their Toyota dealer provided while theirs was being repaired. As they drove along the highway, suddenly the car took off, accelerating rapidly. He stood on the brakes, but nothing happened.

No matter what he did, he could not stop his car from flying down the road faster and faster. As his car reached top speed in just a few seconds, it was all he could do to keep it under control.

Meanwhile, in a frantic call to 911, his brother-in-law Chris reported the gas pedal was stuck, the brakes didn’t work, and they were barreling down on an intersection. He yelled over the phone, “Hold on . . . hold on and pray pray!” And those were his last words. All four people died when their Lexus tore off the road at 120 mph and plunged into a canyon.

We now know that the terrifying deaths of this family were not caused by a freak accident. It turns out that people from all over the country had

been complaining about sudden acceleration in Toyota vehicles for years, and what people are wondering is, “am I next?”

Our investigation found that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has received nearly 2,500 driver complaints about sudden acceleration in Toyota vehicles. Moreover, we have discovered that since 2000, one insurance company – State Farm – has reported to NHTSA over 900 cases of sudden acceleration in Toyotas. We have also learned that NHTSA did very little about it, and when it did do something, its actions were very limited.

Similarly, Toyota either ignored or minimized reports of sudden acceleration. Toyota first blamed the problem on “improper installation of floor mats.” Never mind that many reports of sudden acceleration involved vehicles that didn’t even have floor mats. Now they blame it on sticky gas pedals.

While I remain skeptical that these are the sole causes, the way these complaints were handled indicates problems at both NHTSA and Toyota.

Since 2003, NHTSA has undertaken a multitude of investigations into sudden unintended acceleration. But there is a serious question of whether NHTSA used all of its regulatory tools to thoroughly investigate this issue. When I read press accounts about how former NHTSA officials were hired by Toyota and then helped “negotiate the scope” of regulatory inquiries, I have my doubts.

In the case of Toyota, there is striking evidence that the company was at times more concerned with profit than with customer safety. Toyota’s own internal documents indicate that a premium was placed on delaying or closing NHTSA investigations, delaying new safety rules, and blocking the discovery of safety defects. In fact, Toyota officials bragged about saving \$100 million by preventing NHTSA from finding a defect related to sudden acceleration.

The recent Prius recall represents yet another troubling pattern of delay when it comes to revealing safety information. A few weeks ago, Toyota announced it would recall certain Prius models because of a software problem related to the braking system. Drivers began complaining to NHTSA about Prius brake problems last year.

Toyota knew about this problem and was already addressing it for new cars on the assembly line. But at the same time, Toyota withheld that information from both NHTSA and current Prius drivers until months later. If the spotlight had not already been shining brightly on Toyota, would the public have ever been told?

NHTSA failed the taxpayers and Toyota failed their customers. Thousands of complaints, multiple investigations, and serial recalls are bad enough. But we now have 39 deaths attributed to sudden acceleration in Toyotas. To give that horrifying number some perspective, there were 27 deaths attributed to the famous Pinto exploding gas tank of the 1970s.

In short, if the Camry and the Prius were airplanes, they would be grounded.

These facts raise several important questions:

- Is it safe to drive these cars?
- Is Toyota now serious about solving the problem?
- Can NHTSA say the cause of the problem has been identified and fixed?
- What can we do to prevent this kind of thing from happening again?
- Can the American people trust NHTSA to ensure vehicle safety?

Hopefully we will find some answers to these and other questions today.

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