

The Politics of Risk

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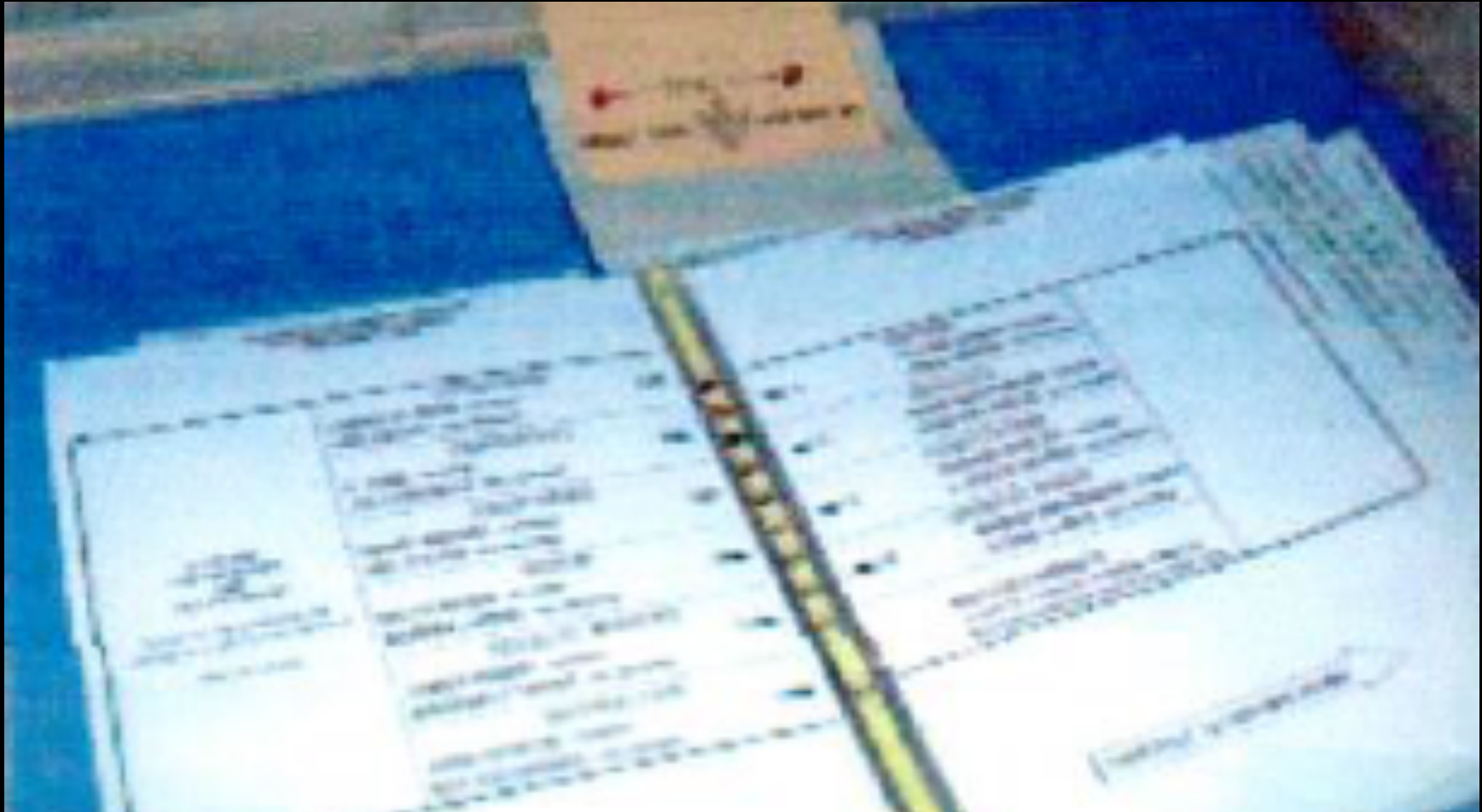
Observation

- Some of the most widely recognized “turning points” in the U.S. Presidency since 2000 have involved technological failures, breakdowns, or disasters.

November 2000

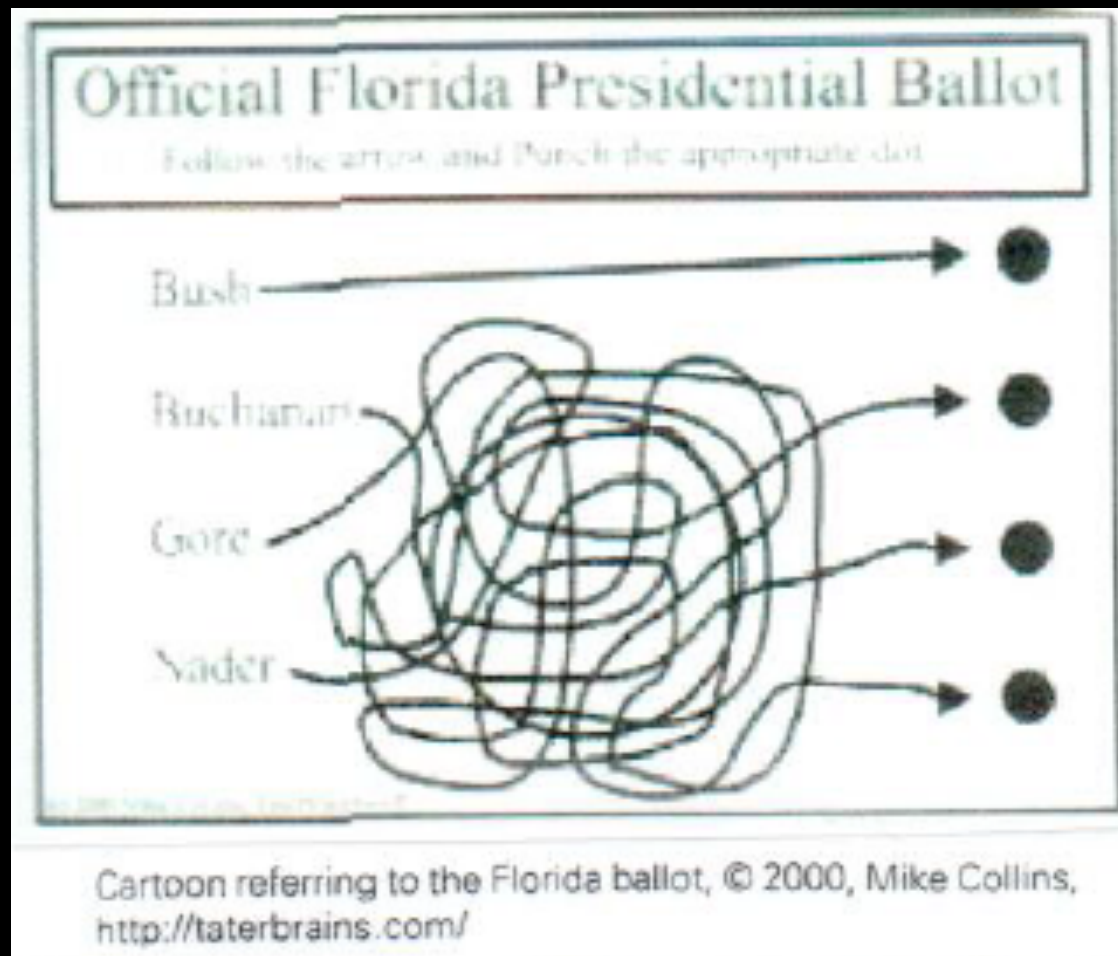
- Florida Vote: 537 vote margin (of 6 million)
- Media coverage, recounts, lawsuits exposed Americans to the messy machinery of democracy

Sprawling, Cobbled Together Technological System

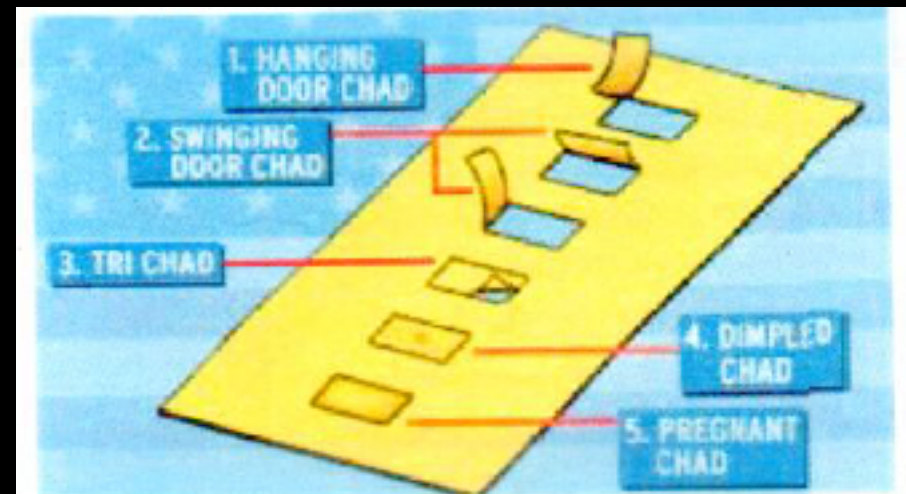
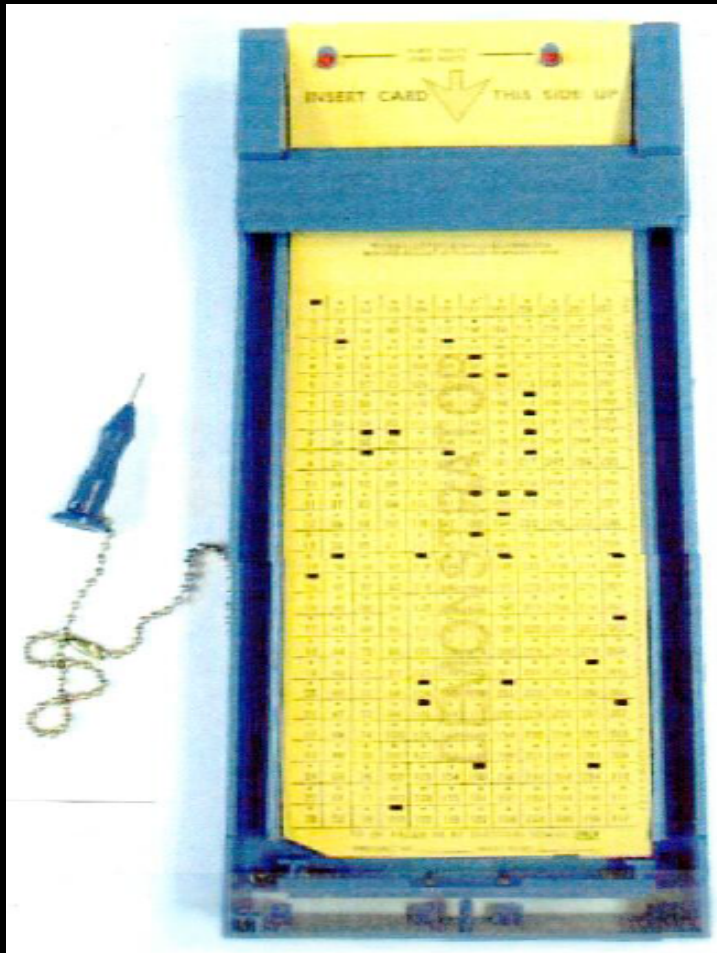


Butterfly ballot, Palm Beach, FL

Sprawling, Cobbled Together Technological System



Sprawling, Cobbled Together Technological System



Vulnerability

- Failures of mundane system components
- Inadequate maintenance
- Incompetence, negligence, corruption

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Observation

- Some of the most widely recognized “turning points” in the U.S. Presidency since 2000 have involved **sociotechnical** failures, breakdowns, or disasters.

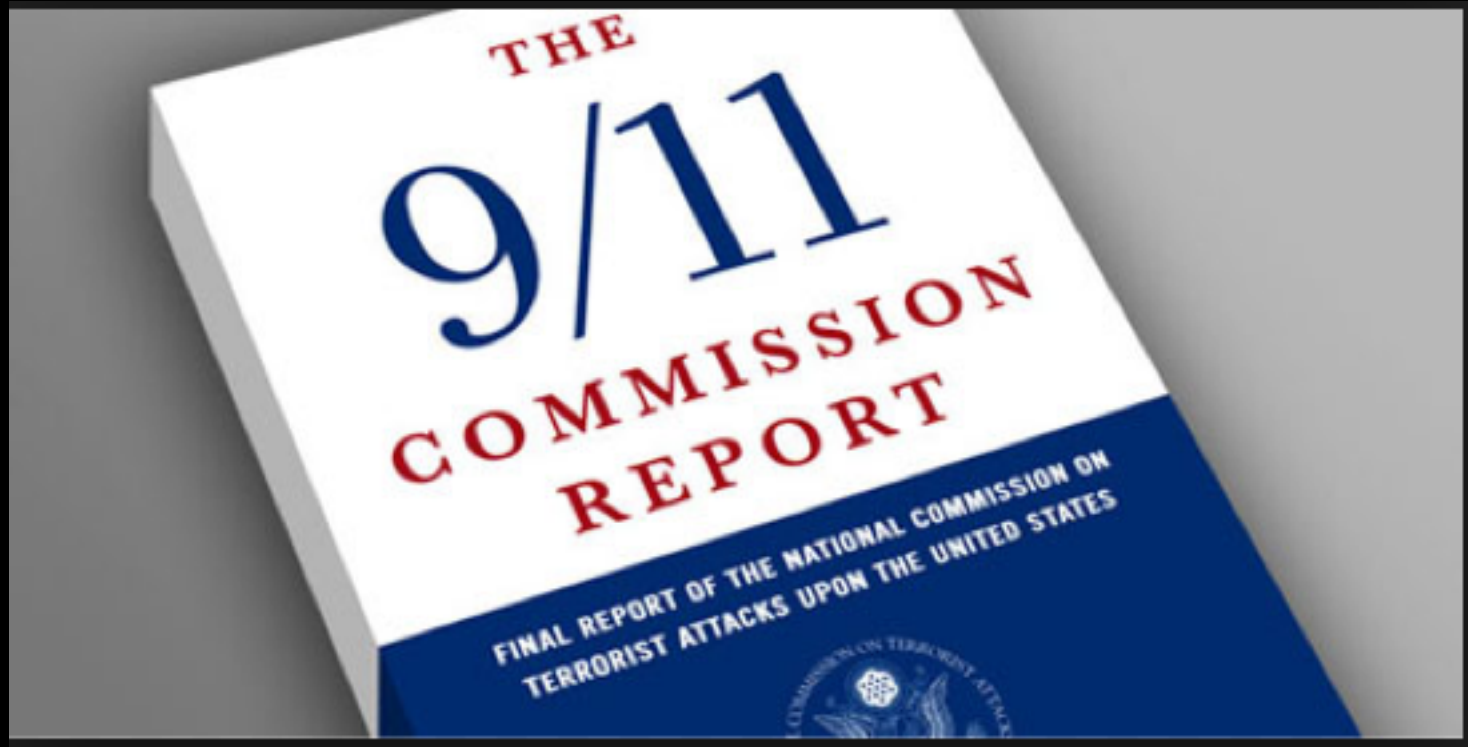
Definitions of Risk



September 2001

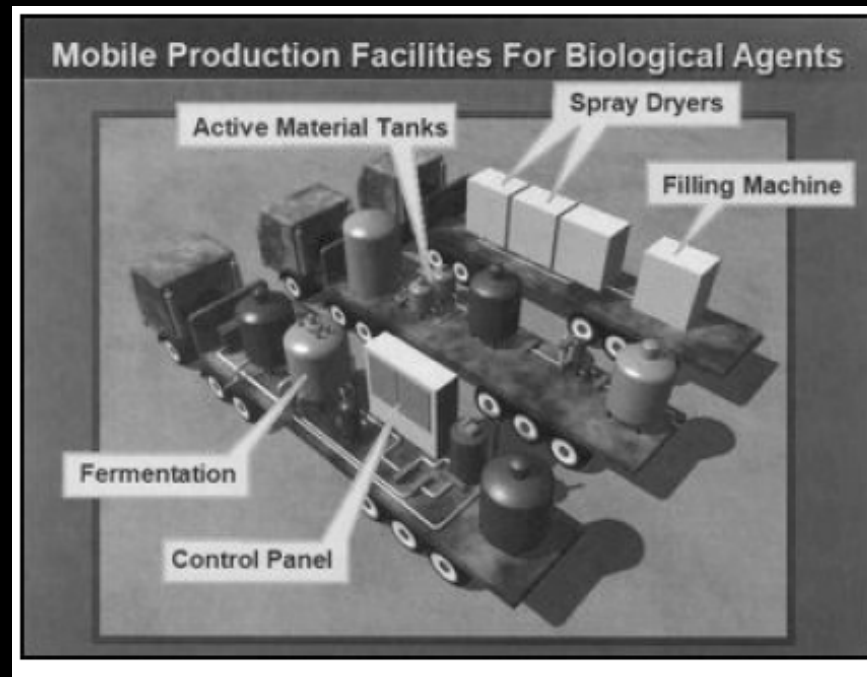


September 2001

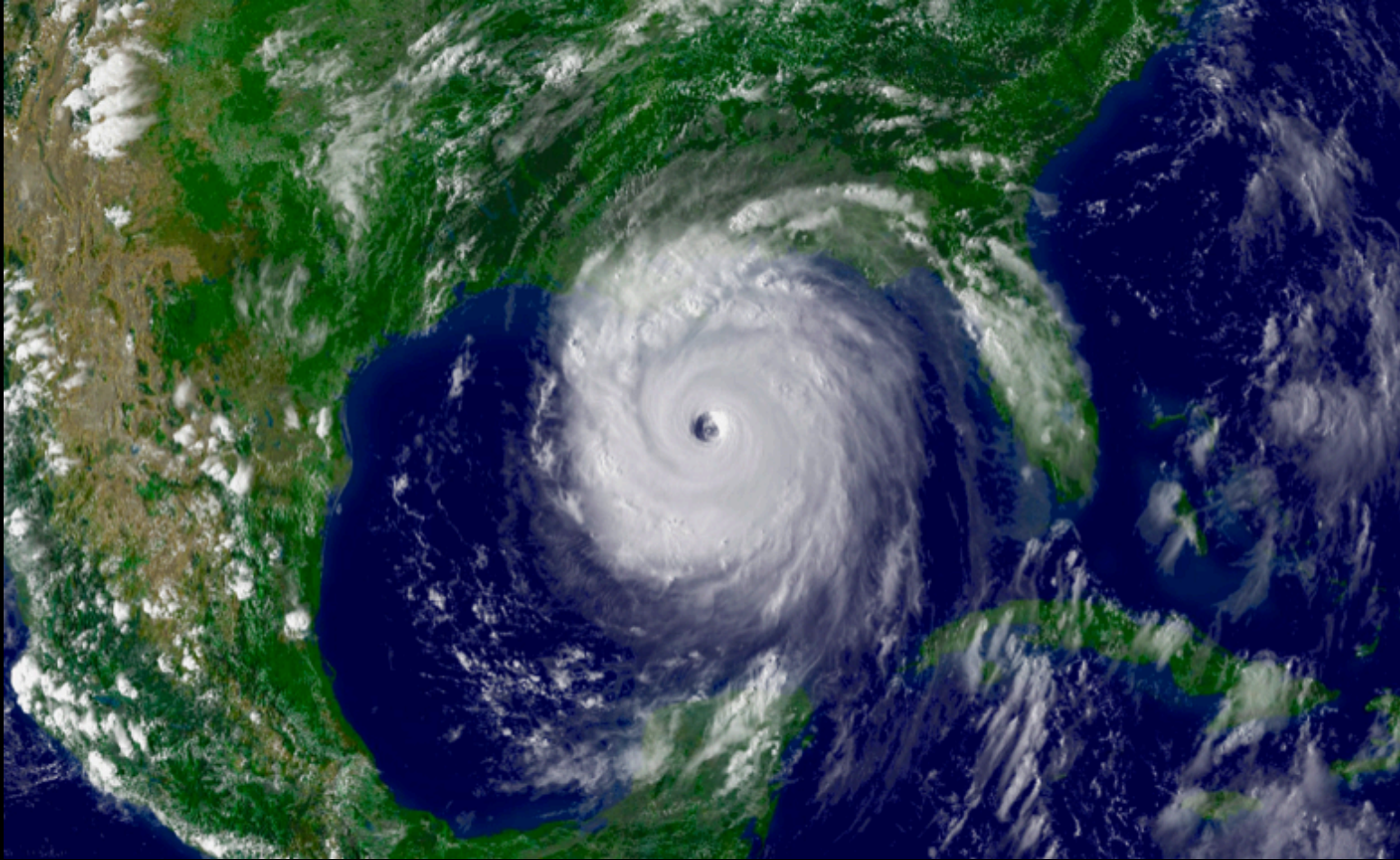


March 2003 to January 2005

- The search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq begins with the invasion.
- Search officially ended in January 2005.



August 2005



Katrina

- No “natural” disasters, only sociotechnical ones
- Vision of orderly, manageable sociotechnical systems critical to political legitimacy
- Disaster made disorder of systems visible; profoundly disturbing collective experience
- Reestablishing order requires both material action and discursive containment
- Public inquiries: as an effort to reassure, but may not succeed

Two More Examples

- 2008 Financial crisis
- Botched rollout of HealthCare.gov

Why Are Technological Failures So Central?

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- Politics of risk definitions

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MAY 27, 1950

TOBACCO SMOKING AS A POSSIBLE ETIOLOGIC FACTOR IN BRONCHIOGENIC CARCINOMA

A Study of Six Hundred and Eighty-Four Proved Cases

ERNEST L. WYNDER

and

EVARTS A. GRAHAM, M.D.

St. Louis

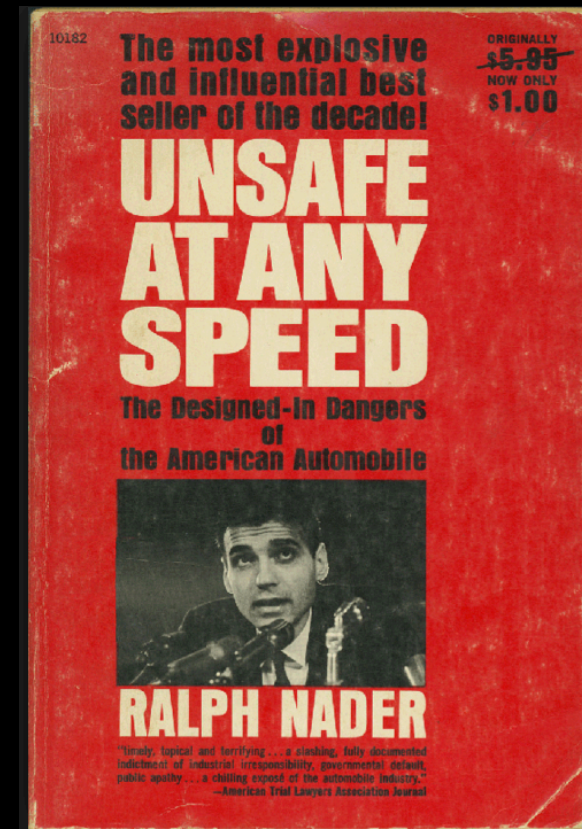
General Increase.—There is rather general agreement that the incidence of bronchiogenic carcinoma has greatly increased in the last half-century. Statistical studies at the Charity Hospital of New Orleans (Ochsner and DeBailey),¹ the St. Louis City Hospital

a few of the workers who thought that there was some evidence that tobacco was an important factor in the increase of cancer of the lungs. Müller¹⁴ in 1939, from a careful but limited clinical statistical study, offered good evidence that heavy smoking is an important etiologic factor. In 1941 Ochsner and DeBailey¹⁵ called attention to the similarity of the curve of increased sales of cigarets in this country to the greater prevalence of primary cancer of the lung. They emphasized the possible etiologic relationship of cigaret smoking to this condition. In a recent paper Schrek¹⁶ concluded that there is strong circumstantial evidence that cigaret smoking is an etiologic factor in cancer of the respiratory tract and finds that his data are in agreement with the results of a preliminary report presented by Wynder

Dynamic Struggles

Nader's Risk Objects

- The second collision
- The Corvair
- Built in oversteer
- Irresponsible corporate officials
- Inadequate regulations
- Etc.



Dynamic process of emplacing and displacing risk definitions

Emplacing <-----> Displacing

- Claiming/showing existence and significance of risk.
- Denying/disproving existence & significance of risk.
- Challenging “adequacy” of controls.
- Instituting “adequate” controls.

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- Politics of dependence and vulnerability
- Politics of American identity
- Politics of risk definitions
- Politics of visibility