

# Gangster government targets Toyota

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Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

What is it about the automotive industry that inspires such thuggish attitudes in the Obama administration? *The Examiner's* Michael Barone coined the term "gangster government" to describe threats by the White House last spring against Chrysler creditors who had the temerity to insist that bankruptcy laws be followed in the bailout of the perennially ailing third member of the once-fabled Detroit Big Three. Now along comes Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood muttering darkly that "we're not finished with Toyota" in the controversy over sticking gas pedals in vehicles made and sold in America by the Japanese automaker.

The basis for these threats is little more than anecdote-based suspicions that an electronic malady related to electro-magnetic interference from power lines might be the problem instead of the mechanical wear identified by Toyota engineers. Regardless, LaHood, headline-chasing congressmen like Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., and a chorus of Naderite auto safety nannies led by former National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration Administrator Joan Claybrook are demanding that Toyota submit to a punishing new round of subpoenas, hearings, and media inquisition. It's not enough that Toyota -- the auto industry's perennial leader on respected measures of initial and long-term quality -- has already taken the unprecedented step of suspending production and sales of eight of its most popular models, undertaken a crash course to identify the cause of the problem, and guaranteed a fix for every one of the 2.3 million affected owners.

Given the Obama administration's catering to one of its favorite special interest groups, the United Auto Workers union, during the government's bailouts of General Motors and Chrysler last year, it is difficult to avoid wondering whether Toyota has become a victim

of the Chicago Way of dealing with competitors. Toyota overtook GM several years ago as the world's leading automaker. The potential of the current sticking gas pedal controversy to inflict damage on Toyota here in its largest single market is seen in the January sales figures. Toyota sales are down 16 percent while GM is up 14 percent (Ford, which declined a government bailout last year, is up 25 percent, while Chrysler is down 8 percent). Keep the controversy going and odds are good that Toyota sales will continue to drop. The biggest losers besides American consumers will be the men and women who own and work at Toyota's 1,200 U.S. dealerships and the 30,000 Americans who build Toyotas in its five factories here. LaHood might as well have said "Nice car company ya got there, be a shame if anything happened to it."