

## Roy Exum: Toyota's Silent 'Mule'

by Roy Exum

posted March 3, 2010

There is a story told about an old prospector ambling into a cowboy town with his pack mule when suddenly the swinging doors at the saloon burst open and a gun-slinging dandy stumbled out to cry, "Hey, old man! Do you know how to dance?" A jeering crowd quickly gathered as the old miner replied, "No, but I've always wanted to."

Well, that young, drunken cowboy then fired both of his shiny pistols towards the ground at the old man's feet. With the flying bullets kicking up dust, the prospector danced a mighty jig indeed. The crowd loved it and, when the cowboy's guns finally clicked empty, he spun them just so, jauntily tipped his hat to his gleeful followers, and turned to step back into the saloon.



Roy Exum

But as he did, the gaiety suddenly stopped because the cowboy and the crowd alike could clearly hear both big hammers being pulled back on a 12-gauge, double-barreled shotgun that had been in a scabbard on that old smelly mule. As the red-faced cowboy gulped and gingerly turned back to face the old prospector, he was asked the question, "Sonny boy, have you ever kissed the south end of a north-bound mule?"

Indulge me for a moment, but all those people who have laughed and pointed at Toyota's torment in the past few weeks are getting ready to echo what that cowboy had to tell the prospector: "No sir, but I've always wanted to."

You see, there have been two important events that have already occurred this week if you've been following the story of how the world's largest automotive manufacturer has been ridiculed and debased after recalling 8.5 million automobiles due to a variety of acceleration, transmission and floor mat issues.

First, General Motors just recalled 1.3 million cars on Monday for steering problems. What? You didn't see that? Where were the TV cameras? Where were the righteous who demanded that, no, the American president of Toyota (Jim Lentz) wasn't good enough, that our "pound of flesh" must come from the "big man" himself - Akio Toyoda - so that he could be publicly humiliated last week? Don't dare think the government is going to slap GM after last year's bail-out.

Secondly, on Monday Toyota announced it will now sell any new car or truck to a qualified buyer by providing that person with a five-year, zero-interest loan. Further, Toyota will change the oil and offer complete maintenance for free for the first two years. And, yes, on top of that there will be rebates up to \$3,000 on certain models. That's strong.

Listen, gunslinger, General Motors doesn't have bullets like that. Toyota's third-quarter earnings last year were \$1.7 billion, exactly the same amount lost during the third quarter of 2008. The company also just sold 2.07 million vehicles from October to December so, with the recall embarrassment, now there is a firm-jawed resolve to make the overblown travesty "the mother of all recalls."

Right now Toyota is processing 50,000 recalled vehicles a day, somewhat easily, too, I might add. To do so, their dealers are loaning cars while repairs are being made, paying rental fees and even taxi receipts. The simple fact is that never in the history of the auto

industry has there been such an intense response. General Motors, on the other hand, will not offer a similar assistance program to the 1.3 million owners in this latest recall because, quite frankly, it doesn't have the clout nor the "want to" that Toyota does right now.

Listen to this - J.D. Power has just announced the best luxury car in the world right now is a Lexus, the premium brand of Toyota that just dominated four of J.D. Power's five main categories. This week Consumer Reports, not a government agency but one of the most respected quality-assurance sources in our country, returned eight different Toyota models to its "recommended" list. Go ahead, look it up. While you're at it, buy the Consumer Reports' car annual; you'll see for yourself Toyota is a tight No. 3 overall while GM and Chrysler are solidly "dead last."

What our jeering Congress members actually did last week while ridiculing Toyota was to make the company more determined, more results-driven and, yes, even a bit angry. Those that mock Toyota as "Japanese" are too stupid to realize today there are 175,000 Americans who are paid each day by the auto manufacturer. My goodness, look how many plants they have built in the United States in the last 10 years while American manufacturers have been stagnant.

Those who laugh and point have not yet been to Blue Springs, Miss., a sleepy town in the northeast part of the state. Toyota has just spent \$300 million building a new plant in that poverty-riddled area that will soon employ 2,000 job-starved people. Toyota also pledged \$50 million to "better educate" potential workers in Mississippi, but had to delay the plant's opening because of a lagging market and (gulp) the hysteria resulting from the recent recall, which is expected to cost the company \$2 billion.

Has this country gone completely crazy? Instead of slapping Toyota around and forcing Mr. Toyoda to bow before a sadly-arrogant Congressional committee, we should instead have gracefully allowed the largest manufacturer in the world to clean up its own mess in the same way we have afforded other car companies to handle their own recalls for years.

What's that? The other companies? Automotive recalls protect consumers when, in truth, very few actual cases are ever found. But what you need to know is that, in the last 20 years, there have been 569 recalls of Toyota vehicles. At the same time, there have been 3,498 recalls of General Motors vehicles. Yes, there have also been 2,691 Ford recalls and 2,419 Chrysler recalls, too. Do those numbers tell you anything, particularly if you are a fortune-teller?

So now America - our Congress and all of us they call constituents - must "behold the mule." You see, all Toyota has to do is wait. General Motors doesn't have "the bullets" to play in a high-stakes card game that offers zero-percent financing, free maintenance, rental cars and taxis, and - most importantly - has its "hold cards" the best-made vehicles with the highest reliability and safety ratings in the whole world.

Just in case you weren't listening as Aiko Toyoda bowed before Congress last week, you should have heard both big hammers being pulled back. You mark this down; those men in Congress, the ones who took the UAW contributions and strutted about like proud little roosters, should have fallen for the ploy, but, far worse, they should have never laughed.

"Sonny boy, have you ever kissed the south end of a north-bound mule?"

royexum@aol.com